



BLUE AND GRAY

WEEKLY

Stories of Brave Northern and Southern Boys in the Civil War.

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NEW YORK, MARCH 10, 1905.

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AGAINST GREAT ODDS; OR, THE BOYS IN BLUE REPULSED.

By LIEUT HARRY LEE.



The Blues had retired across the bridge just in time, for the foe had appeared in great force on the other side. Jack gave the signal with his sword and the fuse was fired. With a terrific roar the bridge was blown up.

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Against Great Odds;

OR,

The BOYS IN BLUE REPULSED.

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CHAPTER I.

THE PRISONER.

"Say yer prayers, ye white-faced Yank! In about two minutes ye'll be on t'other side of the river Jordan. That's ther fate of all that falls into ther hands of Bill Jepson nowadays. Ready, boys, ter string him up!"

The speaker was a powerfully built ruffian, dressed in semi-Confederate uniform.

The scene was a swampy dell just beyond the Confederate works of Vicksburg, the time just after Sherman's repulse in that memorable attack on the Confederate stronghold in the autumn of 1862.

Beneath a tree, with a noose about his neck, stood a handsome Union officer. His rank was that of captain.

The gang of bewhiskered, hard-featured guerillas grouped about him had no lines of sympathy in their faces.

They were far too accustomed to incidents of this sort.

To them the handsome Union boy captain was a foe, and entitled to no consideration whatever.

Bill Jepson, the captain of the guerillas, was known as a cutthroat and desperado. He was one of General Forrest's most trusted men.

The boy captain made no reply to the guerilla chief, but

his gaze turned upward in prayer. He was not afraid to die. Not a line of fear showed in his face.

Jepson glared at him a moment and then turned to his men:

"Hoist away thar, boys!"

The guerillas began to pull on the rope. The young captain's feet left the ground as the rope grew taut.

But, even as the rope tightened, there came a sudden, lightning-like flash. An object whistled through the air and struck the rope.

It was severed as neatly as could be. A heavy knife blade, keen as a razor, clanged at the feet of Jepson.

Thrown from the screen of undergrowth, the knife had cut the rope in twain.

The would-be victim dropped to the ground and tore the noose from his throat. As the astounded guerilla chief turned in a rage to see where the knife came from, there was a shrill scream, and into the dell bounded a female figure.

A young Indian girl, not without beauty, and dressed in beaded buckskin, stood quivering with excitement in the circle.

"Stop! You must not kill the Yankee brave!" she cried, forcefully.

To say that Jepson and his guerillas were amazed would

be a mild statement. For a moment they were too much surprised to speak.

Then rage unspeakable appeared in the guerilla leader's face.

"Great guns!" he yelled. "What do ye mean, Injun tigress? What right hev you ter interfere?"

The Indian maid clasped her hands and, raising her figure, told a plaintive story.

"White captain, friend of Natchez," she said, "he save Wahteenah from death in the black river. She not forget. Uh-na-mulgee, friend and scout for the great white general, Forrest, sends this totem. White boy chief must be given to Uh-na-mulgee."

"Not by a jugful!" gritted Jepson. "You little hyena, you would interfere with justice! No Injun chief can cheat Bill Jepson out of his revenge. I've sworn to hang this young cub, an' I'm goin' ter do it."

At a gesture from him his men picked up the rope to make a fresh noose.

But Jepson saw that the Indian maid handed him a paper. It had upon it handwriting such as he knew no Indian could make.

"Hold, boys!" he growled. "Consarn ther luck! We're beaten!"

The message which Wahteenah brought was indeed a reprieve.

Thus it read:

"To William Jepson, Captain Light Guard:

"You will, upon receipt of this, turn over to the bearer a prisoner you have named Jack Clark, captain of a company known as the Fairdale Blues. My ally and friend, upon whose scouting service I greatly depend, the Natchez Indian, Uh-na-mulgee, has asked for his life and person. Failure to obey this order will result in serious trouble.

(Signed) "FORREST, General Commanding.

"Per J. WARD, Adjutant."

For a moment the guerilla chief hesitated. He would have disobeyed the order gladly if he dared.

But he did not dare.

He turned to the Indian maid.

"Did your father give you this order?"

"My father sent me," she replied.

"Why did he not come himself?"

"He is on the war trail. He sends me."

Wahteenah spoke coldly and with dignity. Her arms were folded, and she stood like a statue before the villain.

Jepson bit his lip. There lurked in his mind a half-formed deadly resolve.

This was to ignore and destroy the order, hang the prisoner, and shoot the Indian maid, and dispose of their bodies.

He could swear that he had delivered up the prisoner as the order demanded, and that they had departed he knew not where.

He knew old Uh-na-mulgee, the Natchez chief. He was too shrewd and cunning to be deceived.

He knew his power. He would avenge most terribly the wrong. The guerilla gave a shiver.

"All right," he growled. "The prisoner is yours. But leave this 'ere camp at once. Git out afore I change my mind."

The Indian maid's lip curled.

"White chief knows best," she said, contemptuously. "Wahteenah does not fear."

"Turn him loose, boys!" growled Jepson. "Ye git off this time, Clark, but there's another time coming."

Jack Clark made no reply.

The Indian maid stepped forward and picked up her knife. She deftly cut Jack Clark's bonds.

In her habitual stoical manner she said:

"White chief come. Wahteenah take him away."

Jack Clark replied:

"Very well, Wahteenah! I will follow."

The Indian maid, silent and fleet as a shadow, glided away into the undergrowth. The young captain followed her.

The guerillas were left behind.

Not far distant was a creek. When they came to its sluggish waters the Indian maid drew a light canoe from the reeds.

She motioned Jack to a seat in it. The young captain complied.

The Indian girl lifted her paddle dexterously and sent the light craft out into the current.

She paddled on in silence for some time. The light canoe sped down the creek, and in a few moments glided out into the Yazoo.

That river, so lately the scene of the assault on Vicksburg, was as sluggish as the creek. A gunboat was sunk near the opposite shore.

As they paddled along, suddenly a figure appeared on the part of the hulk above the water and shouted:

"Jack Clark! Hello!"

Wahteenah turned her head and, with one swift stroke, sent the canoe into the shadows of the bank.

"It is Hal Martin! It is my first lieutenant!" cried Jack, eagerly.

A strange light came into the girl's eyes. They were fixed in a sombre, wistful way upon the handsome young captain.

"White chief remember?" she asked, in her Indian way of speaking. "He pull Wahteenah from river. Save Indian girl's life. She never forget. Never. She belong to white chief if he wants her."

Jack Clark did understand.

He looked at Wahteenah with an honest light in his eyes. She was lithe and graceful and not unhandsome. But he would not deceive her.

"Yes, Wahteenah, that is the custom of your people," he said, candidly. "But you know I am an officer in our army. I may be killed to-morrow. You would not want a husband whose life might be snuffed out at any moment."

"Wahteenah die when he dies," said the Indian maid, artlessly.

"Not for the world!" cried Jack. "I know you are a good girl, Wahteenah, and I like you very much. But I can't take a wife now. We will be friends always. Do you understand?"

A strange light of sadness came into the Indian maid's eyes. She did understand.

She buried her face in her hands a few moments. In the meantime a small skiff had shot out from the sunken hulk and was coming toward them.

It held two occupants.

Jack Clark leaned forward in the canoe and took Wah-teenah's dusky hand. He took a ring from his little finger and slipped it upon her forefinger.

It was just a fit. She looked at it, and listened to his words:

"This is a token of our friendship, Wah-teenah," he said. "The ring is endless, and so will be our friendship. I wish you great happiness. My friends are coming for me. May I go with them?"

One sob burst from the maiden's bosom. Then her face was a silent mask. She drew back the hand with the ring. She did not remove it.

Without a word she shot the canoe to shore and sprung out. The young captain did the same.

The Indian girl drew the canoe into the reeds. Then, with bowed head, silently she flitted away into the forest.

Jack Clark knew that this was not sulkiness on her part. She understood that the young white chief did not care to take advantage of a custom of her people and claim her as a wife, by virtue of having saved her life.

She would have been glad if he had chosen to do so. But her Indian nature taught her resignation. It was not her way to show her disappointment.

Savage though she was, she had a sense of the fitness of things. Jack Clark was sincere enough to feel a pang as she sped from sight.

So the little romance was over. But he had not seen the last of Wah-teenah, nor was their friendship to end here.

The next moment the skiff ran up on the shore, and the two occupants sprang out.

One was Hal Martin, first lieutenant of the Fairdale Blues. The other was a fat little corporal named Tom Peters.

"Well, you can bet we're glad to find you, Jack!" cried Lieutenant Martin. "We had given you up. We thought Jepson had hanged you."

CHAPTER II.

UNDER ORDERS.

"Well, he did come mighty near it," replied the boy captain. "He had the rope around my neck."

"The deuce! What saved you?"

"Only the timely arrival of the Indian girl, Wah-teenah."

"She was just with you!"

"Yes. You see, old Uh-na-mulgee heard that I had been captured by Jepson. So he got an order from Forrest to have me surrendered to him. He sent Wah-teenah to reprieve me."

"Whew! That was close! You were a fortunate man when you saved that Indian girl's life."

"I certainly was."

"You had a close call."

"I should say. But where are the Blues?"

"We left them four miles above here at Rosemont. We have been scouring this region for you since yesterday morning."

"Where is Rosemont?"

"It is Caleb Lord's plantation. We took possession of things there, for the planter and his family had fled and left even most of their clothing behind them."

"Then you found supplies there?"

"I should say. We are in clover."

"That is capital. Let us join the company at once. I thought my fighting days were over, but I guess I am still in it."

"Of course you are. We left our horses about a mile west of here, just outside the swamp. We will find them and ride out to the plantation."

It is hardly necessary to say that the two young officers were glad to find their captain, who had become separated from them during a skirmish, and had fallen into the hands of the guerillas.

Before going further, it might be well to state that the Fairdale Blues were an independent volunteer organization of youths from a New York town then known as Fairdale.

The boys had mostly come right out of school to enter the service and fight for the Union in the great Civil War, which for five years devastated our country.

The Blues had fought with great bravery and credit under Grant and Sherman. They had participated in the attack on Vicksburg, and were even now waiting orders for a fresh campaign.

The rescue of Captain Jack Clark by Wah-teenah, the Indian maid, had certainly saved his life for future deeds of heroism in the service.

The three young officers now struck off rapidly through the swampy region.

They left the banks of the Yazoo and rapidly struck out to the westward. They plunged on through the under-growth for a long time.

A short distance down this they came to a clump of trees. Here were the horses of Corporal Peters and Lieutenant Martin.

Jack Clark and Hal Martin mounted double. In a few moments all were galloping away down the road.

It was not long before they came in sight of Rosemont plantation. It was a pretentious house, situated in the center of a rich and productive farm.

The encampment of the Blues was plainly visible. As the young officers rode up there was wild cheering.

The little company ran out to greet their captain, whom they had feared was lost. It was a joyful meeting.

Jack Clark sprang down from his horse and greeted the boys warmly. Second Lieutenant Gray, who had been in charge, now came forward, however, and said: "Is up and surrender, for you are prisoners."

"Captain Clark, orders are here waiting for you from General Smith."

Jack Clark gave a great start.

"Let me see them," he said.

When the young captain read the orders he was much interested, and not displeased.

"Here, Hal," he said, to Lieutenant Martin; "we have work cut out for us. Read that."

The young lieutenant read:

"My Dear Clark: We are withdrawing up the Mississippi. Sherman intends to send an expedition against Arkansas Post. It is necessary, however, to leave detachments behind to protect our works and bridges. After the reduction of Arkansas Post a fresh attempt will be made to capture Vicksburg. You are commissioned to garrison the trenches at White's Bridge, over the Black Creek. Do not allow any force to pass westward over the bridge. You will find yourself against great odds. But I feel that you will, as usual, rise to the occasion."

(Signed) "SMITH, Major-General."

Jack Clark whistled softly. He knew well that White's Bridge was a strategic point on the Vicksburg road.

All forces of guerillas or scouting cavalry depended on this bridge for their harassing excursions against the rear of the Union army.

It was not an easy place to defend.

Nature afforded little that could be utilized for defence. That so small a company as the Blues should be given so gigantic a task seemed a bit illogical.

But Jack Clark knew his duty as a soldier.

It was not his to reason why. He would not shirk his duty.

Lieutenant Martin looked dubious.

"That is a hard task cut out for us, Jack," he said. "We have never tackled anything like that. Smith should place at least a regiment there."

"That is true," agreed Jack. "But there are the orders, and it is for us to obey them."

"Whether we are sacrificed or not."

"Yes."

"Well," said Hal, "if that is to be our fate, let us move forward to it at once."

"How far is it to White's Bridge?"

"Four miles."

"We shall make it by dark. Call the men into line. We shall start at once."

The order was given to fall in.

Quickly the Blues packed up their camp equipment. Then they fell into line in good marching order.

Soon they were on the highway and en route to their post of duty. Rapidly they marched on.

It was after dark when they finally reached the bridge. Quickly Jack Clark gave the order to occupy the trenches.

Little could be done that night toward improving the

pickets were posted, and then the Blues made

Soon their fires were blazing cheerily. They were in good spirits.

Jack and Hal made as extended an inspection of the place as they could. It only confirmed their fears that they would find it a difficult point to defend.

The Blues were busy at their camp fires. The pickets were all established, and the two young officers were on the summit of an eminence near the bridge. Jack caught the gleaming of a distant star of light.

At once his attention was attracted.

"Look yonder, Hal!" he said. "Do you see that star of light?"

"Yes," replied the young lieutenant, with a start. "What can it be—the light of a distant farm house?"

Jack shook his head.

"There is no farm house there," he declared.

"Then it is a camp."

"Possibly."

"If so, we may feel sure it is the camp of the foe. None of our troops are out in that direction."

"Ah! Look at that."

Suddenly a great flash of light illumined the sky for an instant. It was followed by several more intermittent flashes.

The two young officers watched it with curiosity.

"What do you make of it, Hal?"

"I'll tell you what it is," said the young lieutenant. "They are flashing powder charges in a pan as a signal. Look! What did I tell you?"

The two young officers saw the same flashes at a point further away on the night horizon. There was no longer any doubt as to their character.

But what were the signals for? Who was employing them?

These were questions to excite the curiosity of the two boys.

With them, to be curious was to investigate.

"How far away are those nearest flashes, Hal?" asked Jack.

"I should say not further than a mile."

"Then we are good for it. Go back and order out our horses."

"It's a go."

Hal Martin darted away. In a very short time he had returned with the horses saddled and ready.

The two young officers mounted and rode away. They passed beyond the picket guard and were soon pushing along the highway.

But, as they drew nearer the signal lights, they suddenly disappeared. Jack Clark drew rein.

"We had better leave our horses here, Hal," he said.

"All right."

The two young officers dismounted and tied their horses in a clump of trees. Then they went forward on foot.

It was necessary to use extreme caution, as both knew. The road here wound along the base of an eminence.

It was on this eminence that the signal lights had been seen.

Jack Clark suddenly paused. Hal was close to his shoulder. The gloom where they halted was intense, for they were in the shadow of a great tree.

But outside this shadow objects could be dimly seen. And now the two boys saw a moving object. Footsteps sounded on the gravel. Some figure was advancing toward them.

The boys remained motionless.

There was no other course. To move now might have been to make a sound which would excite the attention of the unknown.

And it was assumed that the unknown was a foe.

For some seconds the boys stood very still. Then they experienced a thrill.

The unknown was advancing directly toward them. He evidently intended to pass right under the tree.

The next moment he was in the shadow. A second later and he was so near to Jack Clark that collision was inevitable.

The young captain adopted the only possible plan under the circumstances. He quickly thrust out his right hand and clutched the unknown's windpipe.

There was a gurgling gasp, but no outcry. A brief struggle, and Jack brought him to his knees.

"Silence!" he whispered. "You're a dead man, otherwise!"

Quickly Hal Martin bound the unknown with a cord which he had in his possession. Then he gagged him.

Helpless, the stranger lay on the ground. The two young scouts could think of no other plan but to leave him.

"But the poor chap may starve!" whispered Hal. "If he is not found, certainly he will."

The prisoner writhed and moaned faintly. For a moment Jack hesitated.

"I say, Hal; let's see what he has to say for himself. Perhaps he is not a foe, after all."

CHAPTER III.

HAL'S ADVENTURES.

This possibility occurred to the boys for the first time. It is needless to say that it startled them.

"On my word!" exclaimed Hal, "I never thought of that."

Jack knelt down over the prisoner and said, sternly:

"My friend, we are going to allow you to speak. But you must not abuse the privilege. If you make an outcry we will shut your wind off."

Then the boy captain removed the gag. The prisoner drew a breath of relief.

"Pretty way to treat a fellow," he said. "I know who you are. Don't you know me?"

"Know you?" exclaimed Jack. "How do you expect us to know you in this darkness?"

"Well, you ought to. I've done work enough for you. I'm Stetson, the scout."

"Jim Stetson!" exclaimed Jack, with a gasp. "Light a match, Hal. I want a glimpse of his face."

"Take care how you do that!" said Stetson. "We are

within easy sight of a camp of Confederates. If they saw that light they would be down upon us."

"The deuce! I'll take care of that."

Jack made a shield of his hands and struck the match. By its flickering blaze he saw the face of the scout.

"It's Jim Stetson!" he exclaimed. "Well, this is a pretty mess! What in the world are you doing here, Jim?"

"We saw some signal lights on the hill and came over to investigate."

"Where are your boys?"

"At White's Bridge."

"Whew! Are you going to remain there?"

"We are expected to hold it."

"I fear you will have a hard time. To-morrow Gates and two regiments intend to cross that bridge."

"Ah!" said Jack, quietly. "Two full regiments, are they?"

"Yes."

"I'll go you two to one they don't cross."

"Don't you risk it. They may join a brigade moving this way."

"I don't care if they come with a division. I have been ordered to hold that bridge, and I am going to do it."

"Bravo! I like that kind of talk. But, have you counted the chances?"

"Yes, and I know just what to do."

"Good! I hope you will be successful. Now, my dear Clark, kindly cut my bonds."

"I will do so."

"Now, look here," said Jack, quietly; "tell me the meaning of these signals."

"Oh, they are only messages between Gates, of this regiment, and Parker, who is a mile further along with his own regiment."

"Ah, they are going to advance together?"

"So I am informed."

"Did you not just come from the direction of their camp?"

"Yes, sir; I came directly out of their camp," replied the scout.

"Then the picket is near by?"

"Not a hundred yards from here."

Jack Clark had been doing some deep thinking. He asked again:

"How many men has Gates got up there on the hill?"

"About one thousand men."

"Humph! What is he doing in this place?"

"He is moving west with a combined force. It is the hope of Pemberton to strike a blow at Sherman's retreating forces."

"I see! We must block that game! I shall at once send word to General Smith of the exact state of affairs. He will, I am sure, send us reinforcements."

"You will need them. You are but a handful to what the enemy is. I advise you to send at once."

"I will do so."

"I am afraid that will do you no good. Hands up and surrender, for you are prisoners."

The voice, stern and ringing, came out of the gloom. For one moment the two Union officers and the scout were dumbfounded.

Finally, as the shadows of a Confederate guard were seen closing about them Stetson, the scout, gasped:

"My soul! We are lost!"

For a moment Jack Clark was aghast and dismayed. It was a fearful reflection to him that they were apt to become prisoners.

It was a contingency of which he could not bear to think. In fact, a desperate resolve seized him to die sooner than accept it.

"Quick, Hal!" he gasped. "We must not be taken. Make a dash for it!"

The young lieutenant waited for nothing more. Quick as a flash, he pulled his revolver and fired at the shadowy figure of a foe and then made a low, headlong dive past him.

Into the gloom the young lieutenant went like a shot. He collided with two of the foe, and once a bayonet just grazed his shoulder.

The daring young lieutenant had no idea of the direction he was taking. It was anywhere to get away from the foe.

So he presently found himself dashing through the woods with rapidly diminishing sounds of pursuit in his rear.

On he ran, until, unable to stagger further, he sank down in a heap at the foot of a big tree.

He felt that he had little to fear now, for the sounds of pursuit had died out. Hal lay panting at the base of the tree until he was well recovered.

Finally he sat up and listened.

All was quiet.

The young lieutenant could see but little about him. Overhead, through the heavy foliage, a few stars twinkled.

The first thing the young lieutenant thought of was his captain, Jack Clark. What had befallen him? Had he escaped?

Or, on the other hand, was he a prisoner?

However it might be, Hal knew that at the present moment he was quite powerless to aid him.

The young lieutenant of the Blues remained where he was until thoroughly recuperated. Then he arose and looked about him cautiously.

He had not the slightest idea where he was, or what direction to take to get back to White's Bridge.

But, in any event, he could not remain here. He must make an effort to get back to his comrades, if possible.

So he set out through the woods at random. He trudged on for what seemed an age.

Presently the trees grew thin, and he saw that he was coming to open country. This was encouraging.

The country grew more open, and then he saw that evidence of civilization, the rail fence.

Cautiously he proceeded to climb over it.

He dropped down on the other side, and had just regained his feet, when the thud of horses' hoofs caught his ear.

There was also a rumble of heavy wheels. He tried to pierce the gloom, and was able to do so sufficiently to recognize the fact that the rail fence followed a highway.

Lights now flashed into view some distance down the highway. Two great fiery eyes, they seemed.

But they were comprehensive to Hal, and taught him a startling fact.

This was that a heavy vehicle of some sort, probably a coach, was approaching. He could hear voices.

Nearer drew the sounds. The young lieutenant's curiosity was aroused, and he decided to wait and see what it meant.

Nearer drew the coach.

The lights illumined the roadway quite well, and Hal saw that it was a conveyance of a private kind. Its progress was slow, and it was easy for Hal to see that the reason for this was the miry state of the road.

On the box sat two negroes.

One was driving, and the other was apparently a footman. They were dressed in half livery.

Suddenly the coach gave a wide lurch and went half upon its side.

There was a feminine scream from within and a hoarse cry of alarm from the negro driver. The fore wheels had sunk deeply in a rut.

The horses pulled until the whiffletrees parted with a crash. Then an alarmed female voice rose on the air:

"Oh, Cato! What has happened now? We shall never get to Uncle Clyde's. Dear me! What shall we do?"

"Don' yo' git afeard, Missy Betty!" exclaimed the negro coachman, in a most reassuring way. "It am nuffin at all, missy. Dem Yankees hab spiled dis here road with der heavy artillery. De hosses jest pulled off de whifflebar. Dat am all, missy. Cato, he done fix it right away."

"Open the door and let us out, Cato! I must see for myself."

At once the footman sprang to the door of the coach and opened it.

Out stepped a young woman, who was dressed in dainty fashion. She was plainly revealed in the light of the coach lamps, and in all his life Hal had never seen a prettier girl.

The young lieutenant was interested in the scene. He stood in the shadows of the rail fence and watched it.

It was a strange hour and place for a young girl to be traveling alone and unattended, save by two servants.

But Hal knew that the girls of the South were courageous, and thought little of making long journeys, depending on their own ideas of self-reliance.

"Don' yo' be a bit afeard, missy!" insisted the negro coachman, who was trying to repair the broken harness. "We'll soon be going right along. I done git you to Marse Clyde's all right."

But just then an incident occurred that was bound to contradict the negro's statement.

Cato, in stepping over to pick up the broken whiffletree, brushed against the horse's heels.

In an instant one of the animals launched a vicious kick.

His iron shod heels struck the negro in the chest and hurled him under the carriage in a heap.

There he lay helpless and groaning with pain. For a moment the other negro stood overcome with terror and not knowing what to do.

But a cry of dismay and sympathy escaped the lips of Miss Betty. Instantly she sprang forward.

"Oh, Cato! You are hurt. Sam, you lazy scamp, what are you doing? Come here and help me pull him out."

With chattering teeth the negro started forward. But Hal could wait no longer.

He sprang forward into the light of the carriage lamps. At sight of him, though, the young Southern girl recoiled, and cried:

"Oh, it's all up with us! The Yankees have come."

"Have no fear, miss!" cried Hal. "I am only one Yankee, and I am a gentleman, I hope. I beg to offer you my services."

For a moment the young girl's manner showed hauteur and disapproval.

The fact that Hal was a Yankee and an enemy of her people seemed to have full weight with her. Distrust was in every line of her face.

"We shall not need assistance," she said, coldly. "Sam, come here and help me. Come, sir, I say!"

CHAPTER IV.

LIVELY ADVENTURES:

Stung by her manner, for a moment Hal drew back.

Sam, the black man, had crawled under the coach, and was trying to drag his fellow servant out. But he seemed physically unable to do so.

Hal did not hesitate.

He at once dived under the coach, and gave such material aid that the injured negro was brought out safely.

Cato was groaning in terrible pain. Hal quickly made an examination, and made the discovery that beyond doubt the negro's ribs were broken.

Wringing her hands in sympathy, the young Southern girl had stood by. She now asked, anxiously:

"Is he badly injured?"

"I fear he is, miss," said Hal. "I fear he has a broken rib or two."

"Oh, poor Cato!"

"It is not necessarily serious, but I fear he will be unable to drive the coach."

"Oh, what shall we do?" moaned the young girl. "There has been nothing but trouble and misfortune ever since I started from Vicksburg to go to my Uncle Clyde's! What shall we do?"

"Pardon me," said Hal, respectfully. "I hope you will accept my offer to serve you in any way possible."

She looked at him in the same odd, distrustful way.

"I do not know you," she said. "You are an enemy of our people."

"As you please," replied the young Union officer. "I am a Yankee soldier; but I am willing to call a truce just to help you out of your trouble. If, however, you choose

to continue on war-footing, I must then make you my prisoner, and take you to camp as a prisoner of war."

The young girl's eyes flashed as she saw the point of the clever jest, and, with a merry ring in her voice, replied:

"You are hardly in a position to make us prisoners. We have the larger force. On the other hand, we might make a prisoner of you."

"It would be welcome captivity with so fair a jailer," said Hal, with a sweeping bow.

"Indeed! You Yankees have a charming way of paying compliments. But, as you are disposed to surrender, I will consider you a prisoner of war."

"I will surrender, with the assurance that escape is at all times possible."

Both laughed heartily. The young girl saw before her a handsome, honest-faced young man.

To be sure, he wore a blue uniform. But he was exceedingly gentlemanly and apparently sincere. She was in trouble. He had offered his services in good faith.

Betty Vane, which was her name, was a very sensible young girl, despite the fact that she possessed the antipathy to the Yankees peculiar to her people. Distrust at once left her.

Hal now proceeded to take charge of affairs. In this he did not forget that it was his duty to return to White's Bridge as soon as possible.

There was no immediate need of his services there before daylight. But, even at that, he did not yet know the route by which to return.

Again, he could not logically leave this fair young girl alone here by the wayside at this hour of the night, with only two negroes to defend her.

Guerillas were thick in the region. Her peril really was greater than perhaps she herself realized.

So the young lieutenant proceeded to minister to the negro's hurts as well as he could. Then, with the aid of Sam, he caught the horses and brought them back.

In an ingenious manner he repaired the damaged harness and whiffletree. He again attached the horses to the coach.

With the aid of fence rails the wheels were pried out of the rut, and the coach was ready for travel again.

The poor black driver was, of course, unable to mount the box, and Hal said:

"I see no other way but to put him in the coach, Miss ——"

"My name is Betty Vane," she said.

"Miss Vane," continued Hal.

"Very well. Sam can remain with him, for he does not know how to drive. Fortunately, I can drive ——"

"Pardon me," said Hal, "I shall be pleased to drive you as far as your uncle's, if you will allow ——"

"But — you are my prisoner, you know."

"Oh, well," laughed Hal, "that only puts me more at your command."

She laughed merrily.

"Very well," she said. "I command you to drive me to my Uncle Clyde's."

"I obey perforce!" replied Hal. Then he assisted her

to mount the box. Springing up beside her, Hal took the reins.

The coach went lumbering on. It was of the clumsy, old-fashioned type, and the road was rough.

But Hal was a good reinsman, and also seemed to play in good luck. No further mishaps befell.

As the coach rumbled on the young lieutenant and his fair charge fell into conversation.

Miss Betty told him of her school life in Vicksburg. Her uncle, Burton Clyde, was one of the wealthiest of the planters in the state.

His plantation was but a couple of miles further along the road. They should reach it before long.

She described the old plantation house and the home life of her uncle, who was now a widower, though he had sons and daughters.

Hal grew more than ordinarily interested in the young girl. She was most charming company.

The young lieutenant was not, as a rule, impressionable.

But, as he sat on the coach box, and conversed with the fair maid by his side, he almost felt as if it would not be a difficult matter to lose his heart to her.

But before they had reached the gates of Burton Clyde's estate Hal had learned something which caused him to change his views.

This was that he would have had no clear field. The young girl's heart was in the keeping of a young captain of Alabama volunteers, who was now in Hood's army.

The coach had now reached the entrance to the plantation grounds.

Hal was about to drive in, when Betty put a hand on the reins.

"Wait!" she said, sharply. "Pull up the horses."

Hal did so.

But a short distance away was the house. Lights flashed in the windows. Servants were about the place.

"My uncle is a very hospitable man," she said, significantly. "He would entertain you with great pleasure. But he is a Confederate, and you are a Yankee. Of course, you are my prisoner, but prisoners are often liable to escape. I believe this is your best opportunity."

Hal passed the reins to her.

"Chesterfield was a polite man," he said, "but for politeness and tact, he never could have compared with you. I see that the prison door is open, so I will seize my chance."

She laughed softly.

"Good-by!"

"Good-by, Miss Vane. I hope we may meet again. You will admit that there is one Yankee not half bad."

"You have been a very good prisoner."

Hal's feet touched the ground. He was about to salute her for the last time, when a startling thing happened.

There was a wild whoop in the shrubbery, the clatter of horses' hoofs and the rattle of firearms. Men on horseback and on foot were seen rushing upon the house.

There was a commotion on the broad piazza, and Hal saw the figure and face of one man plainly in the light from a window.

It was Bill Jepson, the guerilla.

Like a flash, the young lieutenant realized the truth. Jepson and his gang were about to raid the plantation.

Jepson was an alleged friend of the Confederacy. But it mattered not to him whom he attacked when it became necessary to find supplies.

He was here to raid the plantation, beyond a doubt.

Hal Martin was thrilled to the depths of his being. He would have given much to have had the Blues back of him at that moment.

It is hardly necessary to say that Betty was alarmed. Her face paled, and she drew the horses back.

"What has happened?" she cried. "Have the Yankees come?"

In an instant Hal sprang up by her side. His manner was anxious and his words persuasive.

"Miss Vane," he said, "it is no longer safe for you here. I beg you to come with me at once."

A great sob of fear escaped her.

"What will they do?" she asked. "Will they kill Uncle Clyde?"

"I do not know," replied Hal. "I only know it is better for you to get away from here as quickly as you can."

"Who are they? Surely they do not look like Yankees."

"They are guerillas," replied Hal. "They are not Union soldiers. Our soldiers would do nothing of this sort."

"I must trust in you," she said. "Can we do nothing to help my uncle?"

"We can do nothing. I will turn the coach, and we will get away from here as quickly as possible."

"Oh, see! It is horrible! They have fired the house!"

This was true. Flames were leaping over the portico. It was certain that the villainous crew meant to raze the plantation buildings.

Hal sprung to the horses' heads to turn them. But he was too late. Out of the shrubbery dashed a number of the outlaws.

A yell went up from them.

"Hey, thar! What's this ere, Jim? A poaty gal as ever ye see. We'll hev her fer a ransom!"

Hal Martin sprung between Betty and the brutes. His sword leaped from its sheath and he cried:

"Get back there, you dogs! Dare to make a move toward her and you die!"

Overcome with terror Betty Vane now crouched behind her brave young defender. With fierce cries, though, the guerillas closed in.

"It's a condemned Yankee, Bill!"

"Down him!"

"Run him through!"

Hal's sword flashed like a lightning stroke in and out. One of the guerillas went down with a thrust through his neck.

Another had his head cleft. A third was pierced through the heart. Hal had been driven back to the shrubbery when he heard a loudly shouted order:

"Fall back thar, every one of ye!"

Who gave this order or what happened afterwards Hal

Martin never knew. He felt a crashing blow on the head and then all became oblivion.

CHAPTER V.

ATTACKED BY THE FOE.

Jack Clark and Stetson, the scout, had made just as bold a dash for liberty as had Hal Martin, when they were surrounded near the Confederate trenches as we have seen in a preceding chapter.

Hal had escaped to encounter the thrilling adventures depicted in the last chapter. Jack Clark and Stetson, however, did not have so easy a time.

They ran right into the midst of the Confederate guard and for a time a desperate fight ensued.

Jack made good use of his sword. He laid two of his assailants low with deadly thrusts.

He was aided greatly by the tree behind which he dodged, thus evading the bayonets in the darkness.

In this way he dodged the foe and managed to get clear. Then he broke away and ran with all his might.

He was pursued for some distance.

Shots were sent after him.

But in the darkness aim was not accurate and none of the shots sent after him reached him.

He kept on until he reached the highway. This he did not take but kept along through the fields behind the rail fences.

Panting and exhausted he finally sank down in the edge of a cornfield. Here he remained until quite recovered.

He wondered what had become of his companions.

Had they been killed?

He grew sick at heart as he thought of the possibility. But Jack was not the one to give up hope.

He knew the futility of going back to search for them.

Whether dead or prisoners he could do nothing to aid them now. They could alone work out their safety.

So he crept out of the cornfield to the road.

All was silence in the vicinity. There was no sound of pursuit now. Jack felt that he had really slipped the foe.

There was nothing left for him to do now but to return to White's Bridge.

He would be needed there greatly before morning without any doubt. So he set out down the road.

He was now not far from the clump of trees where they had left their horses. The boy captain would wait there a reasonable length of time for Hal.

If he did not turn up then he must ride at once back to the bridge and make preparations for a possible attack in the morning.

On along the highway he went cautiously. Suddenly a queer sound came to his ears.

In the darkness it was hard to locate it. A hurried breathing and the faint fall of feet came to his ears.

Some person was coming down the highway. At once Jack became imbued with the belief that it was Hal Martin.

He stepped aside into the gloom a little and waited. Nearer came the footsteps. Then he saw a dim figure

staggering along the highway. So certain was Jack Clark of his premise that he called out:

"Hal! is that you?"

In an instant the unknown stopped.

"It's Stetson," was the reply. "Is that you, Captain Clark?"

"Yes," replied Jack, advancing. "Where is Lieutenant Martin?"

"That I do not know! I did not see him after we were attacked. I know he made a break to escape and I believe he was successful."

"I only wish I knew it."

"I think you may set your mind easy on that point," said the scout. "I feel sure that he succeeded."

"Well," said Jack, conclusively, "we can go on to the spot where we left the horses and wait for him."

"Very well! I believe I will accompany you to the bridge."

So the scout and the captain set out down the road. Jack Clark soon recognized the spot where the horses were left.

They were found safely, and they now waited for Hal.

An hour went by, and then another. Still no sign of the young lieutenant. Jack expressed his anxiety.

"I fear he is a prisoner," he said. "I cannot believe that he was killed."

"I'll tell ye what my opinion is."

"What?"

"He has got away all right and is lost in the woods. It would be an easy matter in the dark. He'll probably come out all right to-morrow."

"Your supposition is not unreasonable," said Jack. "And it is encouraging as well. I shall accept it. We will return to the bridge. I will leave Lieutenant Martin's horse here for him."

"Very good," agreed the scout. "You may ride on and I will walk. I will reach the bridge in due time."

"By no means," said Jack. "My horse will easily carry us both."

So the scout mounted behind the young captain and they rode away toward the bridge.

In due time Jack passed the picket guard. As he entered the camp he was met by Second Lieutenant Gray.

"Ah, Captain Clark!" he cried, "we were greatly worried about you. I am glad you have returned."

"I am glad to get back, Gray," said Jack. "But what has happened since I have been gone?"

"There are further dispatches for you from General Smith."

"Ah, where are they?"

The lieutenant took them from his pocket. Jack Clark hastily read as follows:

"My dear Clark: Hold out at White's Bridge as long as you can. I don't want you to sacrifice yourself or your company. I advise you on the approach of the enemy to blow up the bridge. Then you can with ease keep them from crossing the creek for a good while. It is very deep

and not possible to ford at that point. Retire only when compelled to and then report to me here.

(Signed) "SMITH, Major-General."

Jack crumpled the paper in his hand and nodded compliantly.

"That is all right," he said. "We will obey that order."

Then he rolled himself up in his blanket and lay down for a short sleep. The scout Stetson did the same.

When Jack Clark awoke it was daylight. He sprung to his feet and saw the Blues responding to roll-call.

The young captain walked rapidly to the little eminence near by with the idea of taking a look over the country. But he met the scout Stetson, who was much excited.

"Captain," he said, "there is a Confederate column on the march this way, and not two miles distant."

Jack ran to the summit of the eminence. A brief look through his glass told him that this was true.

There was no doubt but that Gates was moving down to make a crossing at White's Bridge. It meant that the Blues were in for a hot experience.

But Jack Clark had not the least fear but that his boys would acquit themselves well. He ordered them into the trenches at once.

All preparations were made for the defence. Kegs of powder were placed under the bridge and a train laid to blow it up should it become necessary.

This would be the last resort.

If the Blues were driven from their trenches they would fall back across the bridge.

Jack Clark mounted the eminence again and kept a close watch of the movements of the foe.

He saw Gates' men coming down the road in column. He saw that they had artillery with them.

This was a disappointing discovery to the boy captain. He much wished that he had at least a couple of field pieces.

Without the artillery it would be harder to hold the trenches. But yet the young captain was determined to make a desperate stand.

If he was repulsed, it would be only because of vastly superior numbers and an overpowering force.

Nearer drew the gray columns. On they came until barely a half mile away. Then Jack saw the artillery gallop down in advance. At six hundred yards they halted and unlimbered their guns.

Gates had been informed, of course, by his scouts of the presence of an armed force at the bridge.

He now sent a horseman bearing a flag of truce. Jack went out to meet him.

"Colonel Gates sends his respects and demands your unconditional surrender," said the truce bearer.

"Give my respects to Colonel Gates in return and tell him that I decline his demand. That if he advances upon this position it will be to his sorrow."

The truce bearer departed.

A short while after his return to the Confederate lines the artillery opened fire. The guns threw a few shells, but they did not do much damage.

Either the gunners were poor or the ammunition was not good. Many of the shells fell short.

Jack felt much elated.

He felt encouraged to believe that he might yet hold his position. But now the infantry column were seen to deploy and advance in line of skirmish.

Firing began at once. The enemy's sharpshooters drew up as near as they dared to the trenches.

But the Blues were well protected and they answered the fire so hotly that the foe were cautious about approaching nearer.

For a time the battle raged thus.

Jack cared nothing for this method of attack. He could prolong the defense indefinitely.

But, as he expected, this did not last long. Gates was merely feeling the foe. With the odds ten to one in his favor there was but one thing for him to do.

And this he now proceeded to do.

A solid line of infantry was seen advancing rapidly across the field.

With colors flying and bayonets fixed the Confederates now came on at the charge. It was a crucial moment.

Jack Clark went through the trenches and spoke words of cheer to his boys. The young captain knew the importance of a desperate resistance.

The charging column must be hurled back. If it ever crossed the breastwork the Blues would be driven from their trenches.

The odds were great, but Jack Clark never once lost courage.

The boy captain, sword in hand, walked the trenches. He watched the advancing column keenly.

"Let them come on," he said. "Wait till they get close and then give it to them!"

The Blues waited. Nearer drew the line of gray.

It was an exciting moment and a scene hard to depict. The Confederate officers were in front of their men and waving their swords to encourage them.

Then suddenly the gray line broke into the double quick. With lowered bayonets they came on.

CHAPTER VI.

* REPULSED.

It was the supreme moment. With a wild shout Jack Clark sprang upon the breastworks.

"Give it to 'em, boys! Fire!"

The Blues sent a raking volley down into the close ranks. It staggered them and covered the ground with dead and wounded men.

Once more they rallied and came on.

Again a terrible volley shattered them. Their line seemed to melt. But again it closed up.

For a third time they came on. This time the Blues had to load.

The Confederates had got to the very base of the breastworks before they met the next volley. The result was frightful.

A sheet of flame and smoke leaped from the muzzles of

the Blues' muskets. The gray line was swept back as before a blast.

Then Jack Clark went over the breastworks.

"After them, boys! Give them the bayonet!—Charge!"

With one mad hurrah the Blues went after the foe. No wonder their name was a synonym of terror in Confederate camps.

Like demons they rushed the Confederate line, broken and shattered now. In a jiffy it was flying across the field.

But Jack Clark was too shrewd to overdo matters. He did not allow the Blues to go too far.

One hundred yards from the trenches he called them back. They retreated victorious to their works.

Gates was much discomfited by his signal repulse. He drew his regiment back and the artillery now opened again in a desultory way.

Jack Clark and his boys felt indeed much elated. But the boy captain was not rash enough to accept the absolute belief that they would be able to hold the trenches indefinitely.

This was too much to hope for.

There was no doubt that Gates would be reinforced by Ferguson and others. Indeed it was but a few moments later that Stetson, the scout, appeared and said:

"You gave them a good beating, Clark, but they will come again."

"Then we must try and give them another," said Jack.

"I am afraid that will not be easy," said the scout. "They will be stronger next time."

"Do you know that?"

"I think I do. I am informed that Ferguson's brigade is only a mile in the rear of Gates now."

Jack Clark knit his brow. If this was true he saw at once that they could not hope to remain with safety in their present position.

But the young captain had expected this. He had in mind the orders sent him by General Smith to if necessary retreat across the creek and destroy the bridge.

This would certainly keep the foe at bay for a time. Jack was therefore bound to be on the alert.

It was not long before he saw that Gates had once more extended his line of advance.

Then he saw the real reason. What he had feared was about to happen. Ferguson's brigade had come up and an overwhelming force faced the Blues.

"We are against great odds," said the young captain. "We can't hold our own any length of time here. It will not even do to hazard another attack."

With this conviction it did not take Jack Clark long to act. He at once gave orders to the Blues to abandon the trenches.

The order was obeyed.

In good order the Blues left the trenches and retired across the bridge. Then as they formed on the opposite bank Jack was given a start of surprise.

A guard was at the bridge ready for the signal to fire the fuse. Just then a great shout went up.

Across the bridge came a horse and rider. He galloped over the bridge and drew rein before Jack.

"Hal Martin!" cried the boy captain. "You have come back safe! We waited for you a long time. Thank heaven, you escaped."

Hal's face was pale and his manner excited.

"Yes," he said. "I will tell you some startling things in a short while. But at this moment I must tell you that a full brigade of the foe is on its way here to attack you."

"I have been advised of that," said Jack, "and that is why we abandoned the defenses over there. I shall destroy the bridge."

"It is your only chance!" cried Hal. "Look yonder!"

He pointed to the hilltop beyond. It was suddenly covered with Confederates.

The Blues had retired across the bridge just in time, for the foe had appeared in great force on the other side. Jack gave the signal with his sword and the fuse was fired.

With a terrific roar the bridge was blown up.

Its heavy timbers were hurled in air and such as were out of water began to burn.

It was impossible for the foe to make a crossing now. They could only open fire from where they were.

The Blues now retired to cover and began to return the fire.

The scene which ensued was indeed an exciting one. Numberless attempts were made to cross the creek.

Fording was out of the question, as it was too deep. Swimming was not practicable and an attempt to construct a floating bridge was a failure.

The Blues could shoot down the foe as fast as they appeared at the water's edge. It was a position where a handful of men could hold a large force at bay.

To describe the scene in detail would require volumes. Suffice it to say that the Confederates presently withdrew to a safe distance from whence they contented themselves with answering the Blues' fire in a haphazard way.

Despite all this, though, Jack Clark knew that his success could not last.

The foe needed only the coming of nightfall to effect a crossing of the creek. Then the Blues would be overwhelmed.

It would not do for the little company to remain longer than the close of day.

To encompass their own safety they must then fall back, unless reinforcements would come.

After all the chief object desired by General Smith had been gained.

The brigade which had been ordered to harass Sherman's retreat had been held in check long enough so that its object had been defeated.

So Jack felt no compunction in effecting a retreat as soon as darkness should come.

"Pshaw!" said the scout Stetson, "a repulse of this sort is no disgrace. You might really regard it as a victory."

"I don't know but that you are right," agreed Jack. "At any rate we know that we have done our best."

Just then Hal Martin, who had been busy since his return directing the defense, now came up.

We left the young lieutenant at the close of a preceding chapter in a rather serious predicament.

He had been struck down in the shrubbery of Burton Clyde's plantation by the minions of Jepson, the guerilla, who left him for dead.

When Hal recovered his senses it was some while later. He sat up and for a while was very giddy. All was darkness about him.

Gradually a recollection of all came back to him.

He was some while recovering. His head was sorely confused. He discovered that his injury consisted of a scalp wound from a terrific glancing blow on the head.

Hal made several efforts and finally managed to get upon his feet. Then a recollection of all came back to him.

He recalled the incident of the drive with Betty Vane on the Clyde coach. In fact the outlines of the coach were visible but a few yards away.

But the horses were gone!

Not a human being was visible in the vicinity. The dead form of the negro Cato lay half out of the coach where the bayonet of a guerilla had killed him.

But a horrible sickening thought came to him.

What of Miss Betty? Doubtless she was a prisoner in the power of Jepson. He shuddered when he thought of it.

He staggered up the drive and saw the smoldering ruins of the old plantation house. The dead bodies of its master and his servants were in the ashes.

"Horrible!" muttered the young lieutenant. "It must be avenged."

He knew that it was futile for him to attempt pursuit.

The guerillas were doubtless ere this miles away. Hal felt a chill as it occurred to him that he might never see nor hear of Betty Vane again.

There was but one thing left for him to do and that was to return to White's Bridge and his comrades.

The day was breaking and with the light he was better enabled to place himself. He soon found his way back to the highway where the horses had been left.

It was necessary to proceed with great caution. The roads were filled with marching lines of Confederates.

Hal was obliged to make a long detour in order to finally reach the bridge. He crossed it just in time.

As he came up to Jack now the boy captain asked eagerly:

"Now we have time, Hal; tell me all about your adventures."

"It will give me pleasure to do so," said the young lieutenant.

Then he narrated to Jack all the incidents that had befallen him.

The boy captain listened with interest.

"That is thrilling indeed!" he said. "You think the young woman is in the power of that villain Jepson?"

"I am sure of it!"

"Well, he must be dealt with. It is time that his career was cut short. I don't think General Forrest should feel proud of such a protege."

"Miss Vane ought to be rescued."

"She shall be if such a thing is possible. As soon as we are done here, we shall be free to hunt down those guerillas. And we will do so at any cost."

"Good," cried Hal. "It is a task which I shall like."

"We shall withdraw from here about dark. Then I shall report to General Smith. I am sure he will sanction my endeavor to run down Jepson."

"I feel sure that he will, too. It will be a great thing for the service."

Just then a shell came hissing down and struck but a few yards away. It exploded with terrific force.

Jack and Hal flung themselves upon their faces and thus luckily escaped what might have been death.

They were literally covered with earth and debris. It was certainly a very close call for them.

CHAPTER VII.

ON BOARD THE PRAIRIE BELLE.

The shell was of a larger variety than any yet fired by the foe. Jack at once turned his glass upon the Confederate position.

He saw that a heavy gun had been brought up and that the range of the Blues' position had been found.

A few such shells would destroy any trenches in the vicinity. There was no safety for the Blues in their position now.

Jack Clark saw at once that the time had come to abandon the defense.

Darkness would soon be at hand. So he decided to at once order a retreat. The Blues left the trenches and fell back.

Loud cheers of exultation came from the foe on the other bank. But Hal Martin shook his sword at them and cried:

"We've held you all right! Do what you want to now. You are harmless."

The Blues rapidly withdrew over the ridge. It was not long before they were in the highway beyond.

At once they now set out on the return march to Smith's headquarters on the west bank of the Yazoo.

They would report to him there and then be ready for another commission.

If Jack Clark's request was granted this would be the chase of the guerilla Jepson. On marched the Blues.

There was no pursuit.

The Confederate troops could not hope to get across the creek under an hour or two at least.

By that time the Blues should have gained a safe distance. So there was no fear of a pursuit.

Rapidly the night came on. Jack reckoned that it would take them until midnight to reach the Yazoo.

They soon came to more swampy ground. They entered upon a corduroy road built by Sherman.

It was a tedious tramp through the everlasting swamp. It seemed as if there would never be an end to it.

But at last they saw lights ahead. A few moments later they came to a river landing.

The lights came from the deck of a river steamer. Troops were crossing the gang plank.

Jack Clark halted the Blues and went forward to if possible find General Smith. He met the officer in charge of the embarkation who said:

"General Smith has gone up the river. His adjutant is yonder in the tent. He has all orders left by the general."

Jack hastened to the tent.

Seated at a table in the light of an oil lantern was the adjutant. He looked up as Jack announced himself.

"Captain Clark of the Fairdale Blues?" he asked. "Oh, yes! General Smith left orders here for you. I have them."

He pulled over a heap of papers and finally produced the order. He read it to the boy captain.

"Immediately on the report of Captain Jack Clark of the Fairdale Blues, who is at this moment at White's Bridge, the following order will be issued: Captain Clark shall at once place his company aboard the Prairie Belle and accompany the troops on board to our camp on the Mississippi, there to await further orders.

(Signed) "SMITH, Major-General."

Jack gasped and for a moment was impelled to speak a word of remonstrance. But recovering himself he said:

"When did General Smith depart?"

"Two hours ago, captain."

"Where is he now?"

"On board the gunboat Wizard, which is going up the Mississippi."

"There is no way to send a message to him?"

"None that I know of!"

Jack bit his lip.

"That is too bad."

"You are disappointed with this order? You expected something else?" asked the adjutant.

"I did!" replied Jack. "I hoped to catch General Smith here, for I am sure he would have given me a different order."

"Ah! What did you desire?"

"I am on the track of Jepson and his guerillas. I think I can round them up. I feel quite sure that if General Smith was here he would permit me to go after them."

The adjutant was thoughtful.

"There is little doubt of that," he said. "I wish I had the authority to extend you the order."

"You cannot assume it?"

"No, I dare not! You see, the general may have some particular reason for requiring you to report at Mississippi camp."

"True enough!"

"An order must be obeyed without question."

"It shall be! I greatly regret it, but it cannot be helped. I thank you, adjutant. I will report on board the Prairie Belle at once."

"Very well, Captain Clark."

Jack with a pang of regret went back to his comrades. Hal Martin met him eagerly.

But the young captain's face did not wear an expression that was conducive to gratification.

"I am sorry," he said, "I have bad news."

"What?" cried Hal.

"We are ordered to Mississippi Camp."

"Then, Smith refuses to let us go out after the guerillas?"

"Smith is not here. The order was left for us by him."

Chagrin and disappointment showed in the face of Hal Martin. The scout Stetson exclaimed:

"If General Smith knew——"

"Yes," said Jack, with a nod, "if General Smith was here all would be well."

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Hal. "Can we get word to the general?"

"Not at once!"

"The deuce! That is pretty hard! Have we got to give it up and let Jepson carry Miss Vane away?"

"I see no way to avoid it," said Jack, despondently. "Do you?"

For some moments there was silence. It was plain that all were disappointed. But finally Hal said:

"There is one thing we can do!"

"What?"

"I am anxious to rescue this young woman from the guerillas. You might detail me to go in quest of her. Perhaps I can rescue her by strategy."

Jack Clark was silent a moment. The scout now spoke.

"I think the suggestion of Lieutenant Martin is a good one. I will gladly accompany him."

Jack acted on impulse.

"It shall be so," he declared. "I wish I could go with you. You will report to me at Mississippi Camp as soon as you can after success."

"I will do so," replied Hal.

With this decision no time was lost. The young lieutenant and the scout at once took their leave.

From the steamboat landing they struck at once into the woods. As they vanished from sight Jack felt a pang of regret that he could not be with them.

But there was no alternative.

He went back to the landing and superintended the embarkation of the Blues.

The little company was soon on the river steamer's deck. There were other companies aboard bound for the same place.

The Prairie Belle a little later cut loose from the bank and steamed away.

The steamer was a wretched, antiquated affair. She was what was known as a stern-wheeler and was far from being staunch or safe.

But in desperate emergencies in time of war the safety of a boat is not always considered. When it is necessary to get troops or supplies through great chances are taken.

Jack was at once impressed with the lack of stability in the steamer. He stood on the upper deck when Corporal Peters approached him.

"Captain Clark," said the corporal respectfully, "are we expected to take a long voyage in this craft?"

"I think about twenty-five or thirty miles," replied Jack.

The corporal shrugged his shoulders.

"Ugh!" he said, "it may be all right, but I don't believe we'll ever be able to make it unless we walk."

"Why?"

"Would you mind going down into the boiler room with me? No one but the engineer and captain knows it, but she's making water like a sieve."

"Whew!" exclaimed Jack; "why don't they turn around and put back?"

"Humph!" exclaimed Peter; "don't you see the point? If she goes down with the government troops aboard they'll have a sure claim for her value. That's the trick of it."

"That is infamous," cried Jack. "I'll demand that they run her ashore at once."

Jack at once went down to the lower deck. He met the captain and at once asked him:

"Is this boat in a sinking condition?"

"I think we struck a snag back here a mile or two," said the captain. "If she leaks any more I'll put her onto the river bank. There's no danger."

"Danger!" exclaimed Jack, hotly. "You had no right to start out with such an old tub. What will our boys do east ashore in this eternal swamp?"

"We know the trail back to the landing," replied the captain sulkily. "You need have no fear."

"I demand that you turn about and steam back as fast as you can."

The other military officers on board now agreed with Jack. It was demanded that this be done.

The captain with reluctance obeyed.

The Prairie Belle came about and proceeded only half a mile when she began to sway.

The water was coming into the boiler room. There was no time to lose.

The pilot headed her for the river bank at once. She stuck her nose in the mud and the plank was thrown out.

There was a rush ashore.

As it was, many of the troops were compelled to leap over and wade when the boat settled by the stern and slipped back some yards from the bank.

The Prairie Belle's days as a river transport were at an end. She could never be utilized for that purpose again.

The position of the soldiers was by no means a cheering one. It was a five-mile pull through the swamp to the landing.

But Jack was thrilled with a sudden revelation. The captain of the river steamer declared:

"The only way for ye to git to Mississippi Camp now is to wait for them to send down another boat or march overland. It's forty miles the latter way. Three miles out of swamp roads and ther rest of ther way across the country."

Most of the troops decided to return to the landing and wait for another steamer. This might not arrive for days.

But Jack Clark decided to strike out and march to Mis-

sissippi Camp. It was possible that on the way he might run across Jepson.

The possibility was most alluring. At once all seemed again to grow bright. The Blues were unanimous in favor of this plan.

So the Blues separated from the others. Jack procured directions from the steamer's captain, from which he made a map. Then the march began.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE SPRING HOLE.

When Hal Martin and Stetson, the scout, left the Yazoo landing and plunged into the swamp in quest of the guerilla Jepson they had not the slightest clew to guide them.

They realized well enough that it was a most desperate undertaking they were embarked upon.

But they were bound to do their best. That was all they could do.

Stetson led the way through the undergrowth with the cleverness of an Indian guide. He understood the region and its dangers well.

For an hour they kept on.

Then they came to a small creek which threaded its way through the dense undergrowth.

As the scout parted the reeds and looked down the course of the little stream he gave a start.

Not two hundred yards distant on the surface of the creek floated a canoe. It held two occupants.

One was a dusky Indian maiden in the deerskin dress of her tribe. With her was a powerful stern-faced Natchez. His head-dress showed that he was a chief.

"Hello!" whispered the scout. "Here is a go! Take a look down there, Lieutenant Martin!"

The young lieutenant complied.

He gave a start.

"Indians!" he exclaimed, "what do you make of that, Stetson?"

"I think it is Uh-na-mulgee, the big chief of the Natchez, and his daughter Wahteenah."

"She is the same who helped Jack to escape. Why, yes! It is Wahteenah."

"I see no harm in making ourselves known to them."

"Certainly!"

At once the scout placed two fingers in his mouth and gave a faint tremolo whistle.

Instantly Uh-na-mulgee gave a start and with a powerful stroke of the paddle sent the canoe to the opposite bank of the creek.

He then dropped the paddle and picked up a rifle. It was plain that he was on the alert.

The Indian maiden had bent low in the canoe, her sharp gaze scanning the reeds. The scout now stepped boldly down to the water's edge and held up his hand.

A guttural exclamation escaped Uh-na-mulgee. With a dextrous movement he sent the canoe again out into the current.

In a few moments it touched the bank at the scout's feet and the chief sprung out.

The Indian maiden did the same. Then Hal Martin stepped down and said:

"We are glad to meet our friends. We are Yankees."

The chief gave a guttural assent.

"Uh-na-mulgee welcomes the Yankees," he said. "He knows what the Yankee chief did for his daughter Wah-teena, the sunlight of his life."

Wahteenah stood with immovable features and listened with the stoicism peculiar to her race.

"Uh-na-mulgee is a great chief," said the scout diplomatically. "He saved the life of our captain from the guerilla Jepson. Now the scoundrel has stolen from her father the white girl Betty Vane. He has murdered her uncle, Burton Clyde, and burned his plantation. We are searching for him to avenge the wrong and rescue the captive white girl."

Uh-na-mulgee's brow darkened.

"I know of what you speak," he said in his grand way of speaking. "He is a dog! The white girl shall be taken away from him. Uh-na-mulgee will follow his trail to the death."

"Good!" cried Stetson. "We felt sure we could depend upon you. You have the scent of the fox and the cunning of the wolf. You will lead us to his hiding place."

"I will," said the Natchez chief, firmly. "He shall die!"

"Do you know where he hides?"

The chief turned and looked to the north.

"Beyond the swamp!" he said. "He does not stay in one place. We must follow his trail."

"Will you accompany us?"

The chief was silent a moment. Then he replied:

"Follow this stream until you come to a branch. Then follow the branch north. When you reach the great spring from which it starts wait there for Uh-na-mulgee."

The scout did not understand just what the chief's plan could be. But he knew better than to question it.

So he replied:

"We will do as you say, Uh-na-mulgee! But if we are attacked by the foe before we get there——"

"Uh-na-mulgee will find you," said the chief easily. "Have no fear! I will be with you!"

This ended the conversation. The chief and Wahteenah entered the canoe. They pushed out into the stream.

Soon they had drifted out of sight down the current. Hal and the scout watched them out of sight.

Then Stetson said:

"We're in luck, boy! With the aid of this old Indian we cannot fail to locate the hiding place of the guerilla. We shall rescue the girl."

"I hope so!" declared Hal.

"I know that we will. Let me see! His directions are to follow the stream up to its branch."

"Yes!"

"Let us be off!"

So they started. It was not an easy task. The land along the bank of the creek was heavy with cane and under-growth.

At times they floundered in mire. They then went knee deep in peat.

But they kept on resolutely and at the end of an hour arrived at the confluence of two small streams.

Here they met with a problem.

Which was the branch? Each stream seemed the size of the other. However, it did not take Hal long to decide that the branch was the stream to the left.

So they followed this. The result verified Hal's conclusions.

For in half an hour they had reached a small lagoon surrounded by cypress. The water was deep and translucent.

At the head of the lagoon was a huge boiling spring. This leaped from the bosom of the earth and furnished the water of the lagoon.

About this spring were evidences of former encampments. It was doubtless a spot favored by the Indians.

Here the Natchez chief had requested them to wait for him. Hal and the scout were well tired out and cast themselves upon the ground to rest.

"Here we are!" cried the young lieutenant. "Now I hope the chief will soon come along."

"So do I," agreed the scout.

"On my word I am tired."

"It was a tough pull. The day is very near closing also. If Uh-na-mulgee don't show up before dark, I'm afraid it means a night here."

"Well, we have rations."

"Oh, yes!"

"I suggest we make a little fire and sizzle our salt pork. I believe there are fish in that lagoon. I have a hook and line and I will try to catch one, if you think it best."

"Capital!" agreed the scout, springing up. But this cheerful project was never carried out.

Suddenly a startling sound came to their ears. It was the tread of horses' hoofs on the heavy earth.

A cavalcade was coming that way. They might be friends.

But it was more likely they were foes. It was well to get out of sight until this fact was settled.

So they looked about them.

Fifty yards away was a screen of cane-brake. But the sounds seemed to come from that quarter. Indeed it was impossible to tell from just what quarter the horsemen were coming.

They did not care to rush right into the arms of the foe. This would by no means be a pleasant thing to do.

"Jericho!" exclaimed the scout. "We are stuck, boy! What shall we do?"

"Something! Anything!" replied Hal. "They are almost here."

In desperation the scout looked up. At the moment they were under the wide-spreading branches of a huge live oak tree.

In a moment Stetson acted on impulse. He grasped the lower branch and swung himself up.

Up he went into the foliage. Hal followed him.

Ensconced in the branches of the great tree they were just in time to escape a desperate fate.

For the next moment peering down they saw the figures of a score of Confederate cavalrymen.

They were not guerillas, but regular cavalry. They flung themselves from their horses with exclamations of delight.

"Wall, hyer we are!"

"Dum me! it seems moughty good ter git outen ther saddle."

"If we ain't got no whiskey, boys, ther's plenty of water."

The gray uniformed cavalrymen quickly corralled their horses. A number of them flung themselves down and drank of the water in the spring.

A young captain, handsome and of fair complexion, seemed to be their leader. His manner was such as to claim the attention of Hal Martin and Stetson.

He stood directly beneath them and gave orders to the men in a rich and musical voice.

From their saddle bags the cavalrymen produced rations. Several of them began to collect material for fire.

"What do ye say, Cap'n Clayton?" asked one of them. "Hain't we been fur enough fur one day?"

"Yes," replied Captain Clayton. "I do not think General Pemberton expects us to suicide. We will rest here until morning."

At this there were expressions of approval.

But it need hardly be said that this decision filled the bosoms of the two adventurers in the tree with dismay.

"Jericho!" muttered the scout, "that is a tough proposition for us."

"It is if they intend to camp under this tree," said Hal.

"That seems to be their purpose!"

"Gee-whiz! We can never stay up here all night."

"Of course not! Perhaps after they go to sleep we can sneak down and slip away."

"If they don't post a guard!"

"Exactly!"

The two fugitives in the tree were now deeply interested in the proceedings below. The Confederates had now started fires.

As they worked they sang Southern war songs, and cracked jokes. It was a scene not without interest except to the two cramped and besieged men in the tree.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN CLAYTON.

But there was no help for it.

All that could be done was to make the best of it and wait for an opportunity to escape. So Hal and the scout remained in the tree.

It was not long before the shadows of night began to fall.

The cavalrymen gathered about the camp-fire and made their coffee and cooked their bacon.

The aroma was tantalizing in the nostrils of the two fugitives in the tree. They would much have enjoyed sampling the rude fare of those below.

But neither was so anxious that they cared to risk capture. They knew what it meant to be sent to a Confederate prison.

So they continued to watch and wait.

The young captain drank his coffee with the rest. Then he sat down and leaned back against the trunk of the live-oak tree.

A youth of his own type presently sat down beside him.

"We couldn't find a better place to camp, could we, captain?"

"That is so, Harry."

"I can tell you I'll sleep well to-night. We have had a tough ride. If we get those despatches through to Hood we will have done a good job."

"We shall do so!"

"But I say, Charlie Clayton! There is something on your mind. You don't act natural. Tell your old chum what it is."

The young captain gave a start. He turned a haggard face upon his questioner.

"Do you wish to know?"

"I do!"

"Well—it is—about her!"

"Oh, I see! A girl in the case, eh? Which one is it?"

"Don't jest, Harry! It is really a serious matter. If I knew where Betty Vane was to-night and that she was safe I think my heart would be full of great joy."

"Betty Vane!" exclaimed the other youth. "Do you mean to tell me——"

"I mean to tell you that when this war is over Betty Vane and I are to be married!"

"Married!" gasped the other. "Are you serious, Charlie Clayton? Do you really know what that means? Marriage is a serious matter, you know."

"Yes, I know, Harry! But you know now why I feel so troubled."

"Pshaw! You are foolish! She is probably safe back there in Vicksburg at this moment and having lots of fun at the military dances."

"Stop! Don't get me angry! I know Betty Vane too well. She is no coquette! I am sure that she left Vicksburg for her Uncle Clyde's plantation. She never reached there, for the plantation was raided and burned by Jepson."

"Jepson? What right had he to raid the premises of a loyal Southerner?"

"Ah! there it is. In some way General Pemberton gained the belief that he was disloyal and so endorsed the guerilla leader's foul purpose."

"Jepson ought to be hung."

"If I could get my hands on him I believe I would risk it."

All this was a tremendous revelation to Hal and the scout in the tree.

They knew at once that this was the young Southern officer to whom Betty Vane had given her heart.

It was a strange fate that had brought him to this spot where the two champions of the captive girl were in hiding.

Hal felt an irresistible impulse to leap down and make

known to him the fact that the girl he loved was in the clutches of the guerilla.

But he knew that this would not do.

"Indeed, I can understand your anxiety, Charlie," said the young Confederate. "You do not know just where she is."

"That is it, Harry! She started for her uncle's. Since then I have heard nothing from her."

"But yet—all may be well! She may have returned to Vicksburg."

The young captain shook his head.

"I can't believe it," he said. "I have sent couriers there within a few hours. If she was there, I should have heard from her before this."

"It is all very strange. If we did not have these despatches to deliver—"

"If we did not, I would start this moment in quest of her."

"It is quite unfortunate."

"Indeed, yes!"

"But—what could have befallen her?"

"Ah! many things! You know as well as I that this region fairly swarms with detachments of guerillas and of Union troops. Any greater risk could hardly be conceived."

"It is a pity she did not remain in Vicksburg!"

"Yes, but that cannot be helped now. You asked me why I was in such a despondent mood. Now you know."

"Indeed, you have good reason to feel depressed! But let us not give up hope. If you wish to detach me I shall be glad to go in quest of her."

"You are kind, Harry! But that makes me think of another plan."

"What?"

The young captain was thoughtful a moment. Then he replied:

"Suppose I detached myself until you delivered the despatches. I could ride to the Clyde plantation and make inquiries in the vicinity."

"If you wish I will undertake to deliver the despatches for you," cried the young Confederate, eagerly. "That is, if you have sufficient confidence in me."

"I have all confidence in you, Harry. But nothing can be done until morning. Then we will talk it over."

"Very well, Charlie!"

The young Confederate cavalryman walked away. Captain Clayton arose and went down to the spring.

It is hardly necessary to say that Hal and the scout had been interested in all this conversation.

Now Hal leaned over and whispered:

"If he only knew the truth that up in this tree are a couple of enemies who are still his best friends."

"He would be surprised!"

"I should say!"

"Well, I would like to let him know it, but to tell you the truth it would not be safe."

"Certainly not! But it is tough on us to have to stay here all night. I don't know whether I can stand it or not."

If I should go to sleep I know I should fall. And at that—"

Hal's last words were lost in a startling crash. The limb on which he sat must have been exceedingly weak, for it parted suddenly and with a loud noise like the crack of a pistol.

He lurched forward and went crashing down through the foliage.

In his fall he struck the scout, who toppled over and slipped down to the next limb, where he hung, his legs dangling in the air in full view of all below.

Hal fell right into the midst of the group of soldiers below.

Their repast was spread out on a blanket and the young Union lieutenant landed right in the midst of it.

He struck on his hands and knees and for a moment was unable to recover himself.

The effect of this upon the cavalrymen was almost beyond description.

They sprung up with a chorus of yells. To them it was a most startling as well as unexpected incident.

To see a young Union officer drop down thus in their midst was certainly a startling thing.

But it was fully as startling to Hal. He regained his feet and stood staring at them.

"Great hornspon! What do ye call it?"

"What's happened to we 'uns?!"

"It's a live Yank!"

Those exclamations went up on the night air. Then pistols covered the young officer. Hal was a prisoner.

Meanwhile the scout had found it expedient to drop and was also a prisoner. For a moment the cavalrymen scurried about to make sure that they were not surrounded by foes.

"Are thar any more of ye?" demanded a sergeant of Hal.

"No!" replied the young lieutenant. "You need have no fear. We are the only Yankees hereabouts. We would not be here now if you hadn't come upon us so suddenly."

"Whar did ye come from?"

"Just at this moment from the upper branches of this tree."

At that moment Captain Clayton pushed into the ring. He had witnessed all and now bestowed a critical gaze on Hal.

"You gave us quite a surprise, lieutenant," he said. "Is it a practical joke of yours to drop down out of a tree and scare us half to death?"

"It is a serious joke to me!" replied Hal. "I can assure you I did not come here of my own volition."

"Who are you?"

"Lieutenant Hal Martin of the Fairdale Blues."

"Indeed! I am compelled to hold you a prisoner of war."

"I can expect nothing better. But if I give you some important information as to the nature of our mission in these parts you may look upon us more kindly."

"Well, it is possible," said Clayton, carelessly.

"Let me tell you that our captain, Jack Clark, not long

since, on a scouting trip came upon a series of adventures with myself and my companion here in which a certain young woman known to you was concerned. Her name is Betty Vane."

A sharp cry burst from Captain Clayton's white lips.

"Betty Vane? My Betty!"

"Yes!" replied Hal. "The girl dearer to you than all else."

In a moment Clayton stood before the young lieutenant white and quivering.

"Tell me—speak—tell me all!" he demanded huskily.

"Has—has harm come to her?"

"I hope not, though I must say that a much worse fate could hardly have befallen her."

"Eh! speak up! Give me the truth!"

"Well, she is—"

"What?"

"In the hands of the guerilla Jepson!"

"Jepson!" gasped the young captain. "Oh, my soul! This is awful! In the hands of that scoundrel. Oh, she is lost, lost!"

Hal put a hand on the young captain's arm.

"Now, hold on, my friend," he said. "Be a man! She is not lost! It is quite possible to save her!"

"To save her? But—"

"Yes. I mean it! We left our company and set out into the wilds on this very mission, to save her from the clutches of Jepson. Misfortune has overtaken us and we are your prisoners. But that should not prevent you from going to her rescue!"

CHAPTER X.

ON THE TRAIL.

Captain Clayton stared at Hal in a half incredulous way.

"Do you mean that?"

"I do!"

"How am I to know that you are not fabricating to deceive me and gain your freedom?"

"I do not ask for freedom. What is more, I can prove every word I say."

"You can prove it?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Look yonder!"

Hal pointed to the outer edge of the circle of firelight. There stood a tall savage figure in the dress of a Natchez chief.

It was Uh-na-mulgee.

The Indian chief had come to keep his appointment. He had come to find his allies in the hands of the Confederate foe.

But Uh-na-mulgee was a non-combatant. He had nothing to fear, so he advanced and looked from Captain Clayton to the prisoners with flashing eyes.

"Ugh!" he said. "You no keep! Those be Injun's friends! Give to me!"

Clayton looked at Uh-na-mulgee and asked:

"Do you know these men?"

"They are Uh-na-mulgee's friends. We go to save white maiden. We seek scalp of Jepson, the snake!"

Clayton turned to Hal and held out his hand. There was a tremor in his voice.

"I believe you!" he said.

"Do you mean to allow us to go upon our mission?"

"You are not foes! You are friends. I would be mad to consider you otherwise now."

"That is wise," said Hal, earnestly. "In such a case it would be folly to look upon the matter in any other light. We must work together to save the captive girl."

"I—I want to accompany you," said the young Confederate captain, eagerly. "But I have despatches of General Pemberton's to deliver. To be sure my friend, Harry St. Clair, will fill my place and deliver the despatches. But—that is not regular."

"Captain Clayton," said Hal, earnestly, "there is no necessity for your accompanying us or for worrying further about the matter. I feel sure that we shall succeed in finding the den of the guerilla and we hope to effect the rescue of Miss Vane. There is little you could do to aid us."

The young captain looked into Hal's eyes full and fair. The two young officers, nominally foes though they were, felt an instinctive liking for each other.

Clayton held out his hand.

"I believe you are honorable and true," he said. "I will trust you."

"I assure you that you will have no cause to regret it."

"I believe you."

Clayton turned to the Indian chief and said:

"Uh-na-mulgee, I turn the prisoners over to you. They are prisoners no longer."

The Indian chief looked from one to the other and he grunted approval. Then he turned and strode some paces away and stood in waiting.

"Captain Clayton," said Hal, "I feel confident that we shall rescue her, for I am sure that Indian chief knows where she is. If we are successful we may be compelled to take her into the Union lines. But she will be safe there, and I shall take measures to let you know as soon as possible."

"Heaven bless you, Lieutenant Martin," said the young captain, fervently. "I shall not forget you."

They shook hands. The others by the camp-fire had watched and listened to all with deep interest.

They saluted respectfully as Hal and Stetson turned to join Uh-na-mulgee.

In a few moments they were beside the Indian. Hal made a last gesture of farewell to Captain Clayton. Then they proceeded to follow the Indian.

Thrilling adventures were in store for them.

Uh-na-mulgee led the way through the forest. The swamp was soon left behind and they came to higher land.

This was surprising to Hal, who had fancied that the guerillas had a hiding place in the swamp.

But the young lieutenant had the most implicit faith in Uh-na-mulgee.

"I squeal!" he exclaimed. "I'll tell ye all if ye'll set me free."

"What's that?" exclaimed Hal. "Set you free, you scoundrel?"

"Yas! I don't wanter hang."

"Shut up, you fool!" said Leary. "They won't hang ye!"

"We'll hang you, all right," said Stetson, taking the rawhide from the Indian. "Come out here, you scoundrel!"

But now, seeing that it was a possibility after all, Leary gave a yell of terror and began to hedge.

"No, no!" he whined. "Don't hang a poor feller like me! I never done nobody any harm. I'll peach! It's all right; I'll tell ye all about the gal."

"Very well," said Stetson. "Let's have the truth, now. Mind you, nothing but the truth!"

"I thought ye'd come to yer senses, Jim," said Brown. "We might as well make a clean breast of it. I'm goin' ter git out of ther service, anyway. Thar's no place like home for me."

CHAPTER XI.

AGAIN IN TROUBLE.

With this a remarkable story was drawn from the guerillas.

They betrayed the fact that Jepson had acted without Pemberton's orders in firing the plantation home of Burton Clyde.

Word had reached the Confederate commander, and he was so angry that he had ordered the arrest of Jepson and that he be tried by court martial.

There was no doubt that the villain would be hanged.

This made of him an outlaw. He had, therefore, fled from the swamp, and was making his way north toward the mountains of Tennessee.

There he might find a safe hiding place until after the war was over.

Thither he had sent Betty Vane in care of a strong guard. She must be, ere this, well on her way.

As near as possible it was figured that this road could be reached by riding northwest and giving hot pursuit. But alas! the unfortunate pursuers had no horses.

What was to be done?

Hal and Stetson were much averse to waiting for daylight. Yet, in the dark it seemed almost impossible to act.

At this juncture Uh-na-mulgee came to the rescue. The Indian knew the way to the road, even in the dark.

He at once offered to guide them.

While this discussion was going on Wahteenahad disappeared. The two prisoners were to remain as such until the road was reached.

Then they were to give their paroles and be allowed to depart.

So once again the rescuers set out, led by the Natchez. For over an hour they floundered in the underbrush of the dense woods.

Then they finally emerged into the open country. A

short while later Uh-na-mulgee brought them out into the road.

Here Leary and Brown were given their freedom and allowed to depart. When they had vanished Uh-na-mulgee stepped forward and said:

"Me go no further now. Go back and find braves. Mebbe see you bimeby."

"All right, Uh-na-mulgee!" agreed Hal. "Do as you please."

The Indian then glided away. The scout was puzzled. "That is queer," he said. "What is the matter with him?"

"Nothing, I guess," said Hal. "You know an Indian always has mysterious ways. He will be around when we need him."

"Well, my boy, it seems now as if our course was dead ahead."

"Yes."

"To tell you the honest truth, I am beginning to lose faith in this enterprise."

"Don't say that."

"Well, what show is there? That villain is pretty sure to succeed in getting that young girl away into the mountains. We can never find her."

"I don't believe he will succeed."

"You don't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Well, in the first place, Sherman's line lies right across his path. I think there is little doubt the party will be captured by some detachment of our army."

"I hope that may be true."

Hal and Stetson now pushed on along the road in the darkness. Suddenly they turned a bend, and saw lights ahead.

The lights came from the windows of a house by the road. It was a cottage of humble sort.

Hal and Stetson proceeded now with great caution.

As they drew nearer the dwelling they heard loud voices. They also saw that a couple of horses were tethered outside.

"Ah! Do you see that?" exclaimed the scout. "If we had those horses, my boy, we would be all right."

"But they may belong to Union soldiers."

"That is for us to find out."

"Right enough!"

They now crept nearer the house. It was necessary to proceed with great caution.

For aught they knew, there might be a picket guard or other soldiers outside.

But nothing of the kind was encountered. They crept up to the window of the dwelling and looked in.

The sight they beheld gave them a thrill. The occupants of the room were a dozen in number.

What was more, they were guerillas. Rough Bill Jepson himself was the central figure.

For a moment Hal and the scout could scarce believe their senses. This was a most unexpected development.

What did it mean?

What was the guerilla chief doing here? They could hear the conversation, but it gave them little light on the subject.

Rough jests and ribald talk was the burden of their remarks. Hal and the scout were thus interested when a startling disaster befell them.

"Hands up, ye condemned Yanks! Ye're prisoners!"

For a moment they were hardly able to realize that they were prisoners. It was a catastrophe which they could not cheerfully accept.

Yet there was no recourse.

Resistance would have been folly. They were trapped.

Quickly their captors seized and disarmed them. Then they were led into the house.

As the door was forced open, and the four guerillas with their prisoners appeared, there was a sensation indeed.

A great uproar ensued.

"Who hev ye got thar, Jim Leary? Who's that, Bill Brown?"

The captors of Hal and the scout were, indeed, the two prisoners whom they had paroled. It was easy to see their treacherous game.

Following the two Union scouts, they had met a couple of their friends, and with this reinforcement they had been able to capture their late captors.

Bill Jepson himself was for a moment only idly interested.

"These chaps were tryin' to git ther gal prisoner away from ye, Bill," declared Leary. Then he told the entire story.

Jepson's face contorted with livid hate and rage. He looked at the prisoners keenly and gritted:

"Oh, I know ye now. Ye belong to that gang known as the Fairdale Blues. I wish I had yer captain here. I'd flay him alive!"

"Jepson," said Hal, sternly, "if there is a particle of manhood in you, you will return that young girl to her friends."

"Will I?" sneered the villain. "Well, you don't know Bill Jepson. When I set my mind on a thing I always get it. That gal is mine. She is goin' ter be Mrs. Bill Jepson some day."

Then the ruffian turned and shouted:

"Come on, lads! Here is some fun for ye. Take these two Yanks an' hang 'em to ther beams by their thumbs."

At once, with a roar of approval, the brutes sprang forward. Hal and the scout were quickly led to the center of the room.

The cottage had no ceiling. Beams crossed it about eight feet above the floor.

It was easy to throw ropes over these beams and lead the prisoners beneath them. The mode of torture proposed was of a fiendish kind.

Slip nooses were made in the rope to be inserted over the victims' thumbs. Then they were hoisted from the floor.

The agony of such an experience is something beyond description. It has been known to even cause death.

But Hal and the scout never flinched. The slip nooses were even on their thumbs when an outcry arose from outside.

There were pistol shots and the trampling of horses' feet. The cry went up on the night:

"Get out, boys! The Yanks are here!"

There was a tremendous rush for the doors and windows. The prisoners were quite forgotten in the excitement. The clash of arms sounded outside, and voices rose on the air:

"We surrender! We surrender!"

"By jingo, Hal!" cried Stetson, as he released himself, "they have come in the nick of time. It would have been tough, indeed, on us if we had been hoisted up in this manner."

"Ugh! That is so!" declared the young lieutenant. "But to whom are we indebted for this rescue?"

"Very likely some detachment of our boys from the outposts beyond here."

"Let us take a look."

They, however, had not time to cross the floor, when into the cabin bounded half a dozen Union soldiers.

One glance was enough.

They were members of the Fairdale Blues. Jack Clark himself was with them.

"Hal, is it you?"

"Jack, what does this mean?"

"This is a great surprise."

"What has brought you here?"

The two young officers fairly embraced each other. It was a joyful meeting. Explanations followed.

Jack told his story of the sinking of the Prairie Belle, and how he had determined to push through the swamps to Mississippi Camp on foot.

It was all a surprising revelation to Hal Martin.

But the young lieutenant told his story, and Jack listened with interest.

"You say that Jepson was in this gang?" he asked. "I did not see him."

"Well, he was!" cried Stetson. "I hope he has not escaped."

"Well, I hope not!" cried Jack, bounding to the door. The prisoners were all in line outside.

One of the Blues had made a torch, and with this Jack quickly scanned the faces of the prisoners.

He stopped before the guerilla chief himself. Jepson stood sullen and crestfallen before his captor.

For a moment Jack Clark could hardly believe his senses.

That the guerilla chief was really a prisoner in his hands he could hardly accept as a fact. It certainly seemed a marvelous bit of luck.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Is it you, Bill Jepson? This is an unexpected pleasure."

"Is it?" sneered the guerilla. "Wall, what do ye make of it?"

"I shall hope to make a great deal. If it is nothing more than to bring to an end your career, it is much."

"Are ye going to hang me?"

For an hour the Indian chief led the way through the woods. Suddenly with a guttural exclamation he came to a halt.

Silent as death they stood for some moments listening intently. Then the Indian chief opened his mouth and gave the peculiar call of a species of owl.

So accurate was the note that his two companions would have been easily deceived had they not known from whence it came.

Several times Uh-na-mulgee gave the cry of the night bird.

Then he ceased. Hardly a moment elapsed when from the distance the notes of the whip-poor-will sounded.

Uh-na-mulgee repeated the call. The answer came each time a little nearer. Finally it sounded in a copse near at hand.

Then in the gloom a female figure was seen. Hal and the scout gave a great start.

It was Wahteenah.

The Indian maid glided nearer and said in low tones:

"All is very bad! The guerillas are no longer here. They have departed."

"Ugh!" grunted Uh-na-mulgee, half in anger. "Where go?"

"I don't know," replied the Indian maid. "I only know that they have gone."

Hal Martin and Stetson heard this with dismay. It was an unexpected setback to their plans.

Uh-na-mulgee stood for some moments like a statue. Then he asked:

"Take white girl?"

Wahteenah shook her head.

"They did not!" she replied; "the white girl was sent away westward on horseback with a guard."

Uh-na-mulgee turned to Hal and Stetson.

"White girl gone," he said. "If there is trail, Uh-na-mulgee find. Must wait for sun to come."

"The deuce!" exclaimed the scout. "Let us not wait for that. We can form an idea of the course taken by her. Let us be on the move."

This, however, was not in accord with the views of Uh-na-mulgee. The Indian was desirous of picking up the trail in daylight.

His stoical Indian nature, calculating and calm, permitted him to regard the matter coolly and with method.

To him there was no other way of procedure that could be at all certain. He had the necessary patience to wait.

Hal was inclined to agree with Stetson and was eager to pursue the quest even at random.

But Wahteenah now glided forward and held up her hand.

"Listen!" she said in a low tone; "do you hear voices? Some one is coming."

In an instant all four sank down in the shadows. There was no longer doubt that some one was near.

Voces were plainly heard.

There was a crashing in the underbrush and soon a couple of figures came out in the little open spot. In the gloom it was hard to distinguish them.

But their words soon explained all.

"I'll be hanged if I know whar we are, Jim Leary!"

"Nor I, Bill! It don't look like we'd git back to camp this 'ere way."

"Confound the luck!"

"Thet's what I say. S'pose we make camp somewhars an' wait fer daylight. If Bill Jepson wants us afore that time he'll hev to find us."

"All right. Thar ain't no likelier lookin' place than right here."

The two guerillas, for such they were, came to a halt but a few paces away. Stetson acted on impulse and spoke in a sharp voice:

"Don't move on your life! You are covered and are prisoners."

With a sharp cry both guerillas turned to see from whence the voice came. But already they saw the figures of their captors about them.

Resistance was plainly out of the question. There was nothing left to do but to surrender.

So they held up their hands.

"We give up!" they exclaimed. "We surrender, Yanks!"

In a moment Stetson was beside them and disarmed them. The scout tried to scan their faces.

The gloom was too intense.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Jim Leary an' this 'ere is Bill Brown with me. We are soldiers in Pemberton's army."

"Are you?" said the scout, contemptuously. "You know that is a lie! You are guerillas of Bill Jepson's gang."

"Wall," growled Leary, "hev it yer own way. Mebbe we are."

The capture of the two guerillas was to Hal and Stetson a matter of some importance. They consulted with Uh-na-mulgee and then with sudden impulse Stetson turned and asked:

"Leary, where has Jepson sent the young girl whom he has been holding a prisoner in his hands?"

The guerilla grunted in reply:

"I dunno!"

"Oh, you don't, eh! Well, we'll see about that. Would you rather tell me the truth or hang from the nearest tree?"

"We are prisoners of war. Ye can't hang us," said the guerilla.

"Can't we? You are lawless guerillas and when such are caught it is common justice to hang them."

The guerilla was silent.

Stetson turned to Hal and said:

"Well, we can't fool with 'em any longer. We can't take 'em with us as prisoners, and it won't do to set 'em free. Let's hang 'em right here and be done with it."

"All right," agreed Hal. "Uh-na-mulgee has a rawhide rope. There is a tree over yonder. We'll hang one at a time."

With apparent resolution the two started forward. But the guerilla who answered to the name of Bill Brown gave an exclamation of terror.

"I have not decided yet. First, I want you to tell me what you have done with Miss Betty Vane. I want the truth, too."

CHAPTER XII.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

Jepson leered at the boy captain in a positively villainous way.

"I see," he said, exultantly, "you think I am too valuable a man to hang just yet."

"It may be necessary to hang you up a few times to get the truth."

The villain's eyes glittered.

"If ye did that ye'd never find out," he declared. "The secret would die with me. Ye'd never find anything but her bones."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that she is in a place where she will have to stay until I see fit to go and release her. Nobody else on earth can do it."

Jack Clark saw that the scoundrel had not the least idea of giving up the girl prisoner.

Also, he greatly feared that the declaration he made might be true. Perhaps she was hidden away where she might die from starvation before being found.

Jack knew the character of the man before him well enough.

He had not the least particle of faith in his honor. He knew that he must match wits with him.

But this certainly was not easy.

Just now he felt that he could do little but wait, so he turned to Corporal Tom Peters and said:

"Tom, keep your eye on that fellow constantly. I hold you responsible for him."

The corporal saluted.

"All right, sir," he replied. "I'll answer for him."

Jack now turned to Stetson, the scout, and Hal Martin. A long consultation ensued.

It was hard to decide now upon a plan of action. They had not the least clew to guide them in the quest for Betty Vane.

"Confound that villain!" exclaimed Hal. "I wish we could frighten him into a confession."

"That seems to be impossible."

"Yes, utterly so."

"How would it do to try the game on him that he proposed to try on us?" asked Stetson.

"What is that?"

"Hang him up by the thumbs."

Jack Clark shrugged his shoulders.

"No," he said. "I can hardly agree to that. It is too much like torture."

For a long time the question was discussed. It was, indeed, a hard question to solve.

Finally the young captain said:

"We shall do the best we can. The prisoners must be taken to Mississippi Camp. If he will not divulge the whereabouts of Miss Vane I fear her fate is solved."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Stetson. "We ought not to give her up."

"Well, we won't," replied Jack. "But, first, we must obey orders and report at Mississippi Camp."

So Jack Clark prepared to continue the march without rest. The prisoners were compelled to fall in, and the Blues again marched on.

The wayside cottage was left behind. For hours the little company marched on steadily.

It was near daybreak when they came to high bluffs overlooking the Mississippi river.

Here was the camp of the Union soldiers in command of General Smith. The Blues passed the picket guard and were soon in camp.

Jack reported to headquarters. He told his story in full to General Smith. The general listened attentively, and said:

"Really, Clark, your story interests me. I would have been very willing that you should have continued the quest for Miss Vane. If you wish, I will detail you on that project now."

"You are very kind," said Jack, eagerly. "I will be pleased to accept the mission."

"I certainly hope you find her. As for this monster, Jepson, I will hold him here in durance until you find her. Then he shall be given trial and sentenced."

"He is a scoundrel!"

"Yes, and the noose awaits him."

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you, General Smith."

"That's all right, Clark. I wish you the greatest of success."

Jack went back to the Blues. He told Hal and Stetson all. They were delighted.

"We will scour the swamps for her!" cried Hal. "He has hidden her away somewhere, to be sure. But we will find her."

"Indeed we will."

Arrangements were quickly made for a return march to the Yazoo region. Thus matters were, when an unexpected thing happened.

An orderly came to Jack, and said:

"One of the prisoners wants to see you badly. General Smith thinks perhaps you had better see him. The prisoner sends you this message."

Jack took a sealed bit of paper from the orderly. He saw that characters in blood were scrawled upon it.

"Captain Clark: I know where the girl is, and if you will give me freedom I will guide you to the place where she is hidden.

Yours,

"JAMES LEARY."

Jack shrugged his shoulders and handed this to Hal.

"What do you think of this?" he asked.

Hal read it with interest.

"I think the fellow does know," he said. "But he is a liar and a traitor. He broke his parole before, and he might do it now."

"That is true," agreed Jack. "But we can take a chance."

"Very well."

"I think I'll go up and see him."

Jack passed the dead line and conversed with Leary. The guerilla was exceedingly earnest.

"I swear to you that I am telling the truth," he declared. "I will not go back on you. It was Brown's fault before."

"Well, Leary," said Jack, "I am going to trust you. I shall march you between guards. At the slightest show of treachery you will be shot down."

"All right, captain."

"You may come with me."

A short while later Leary was under guard in the van of the Blues' column. He had given an earnest oath to reveal the hiding place of Betty Vane.

The Blues set out at once.

Mississippi Camp was soon left far behind. The Blues marched until the sun had reached the meridian.

They had passed through fields and meadows and swamps. They had climbed fences, leaped ditches and crossed creeks without number.

They were now on the brow of a high and rocky bluff, overhanging a deep ravine, through which dashed a stream.

Here, by the direction of Leary, a halt was called.

"This 'ere is the spot," he said. "All ye have ter do is to foller along on the edge of ther bluff until ye see a cottonwood tree sticking out over ther edge. Jest climb down under ther tree, an' ye'll find a little wooden door set in ther rock.

"Ye kain't see it until ye git under ther cottonwood. Then lift ther door, an' ye'll see little steps cut in ther ledge. Jest foller 'em down, an' ye'll come to an iron gratin' in a door. This door is barred on ther outside. Lift ther bar, an' ye kin look into a leetle room. It's where Bill Humpkins used ter have a whisky still. Ther gal is in that room."

Without a moment's delay, Hal and Jack, and Stetson the scout, set out to follow these instructions.

Along the edge of the bluff they went until they found the cottonwood.

"This seems to be regular," said the scout. "Perhaps the fellow is telling the truth."

The possibility of effecting the rescue of Betty Vane thrilled the boys. Jack leaned over and swung himself below the overhanging tree.

There was a little ledge of rock below to give him footing.

A glance, and he saw the wooden door. He lifted it, and, behold, there were the narrow steps, as Leary had said.

Jack quickly descended these.

He came to a grated door. Quickly he swung this open.

"Miss Vane!" he called. "Are you here?"

There was no answer. The light in the place was dim. As soon as Jack's gaze became accustomed to it, he saw that the room was empty.

It contained no human being. There were a table, two chairs and a couch.

Stetson and Hal were close behind the boy captain.

"Well!" cried Hal, in dismay. "Have we been fooled again?"

"She is not here."

"That fellow is an awful liar!"

"Easy!" said Stetson. "His story has been verified in every other particular. Perhaps she was here."

"Why is she not here now, then?"

"For the good reason that she may have been rescued. Or, again, she may have escaped."

This was certainly possible. That the captive girl had really been in the place Hal now verified by picking up a bit of dainty lace from her dress.

"There you are!" he cried. "She certainly has been here!"

"That settles it!" cried Jack. "She was either removed to some other place, or has been rescued."

The trio went back to the bluff.

Jack Clark faced the guerilla, Leary, and said:

"Leary, your story has been verified in every particular but one."

The guerilla's face paled.

"What is that?" he asked.

"The girl is not there."

Leary gave a gasp and turned livid.

"Not thar!" he exclaimed.

"Not there."

"Why, what does that mean?"

"We discovered evidence, though, that she had been there. But she is gone."

"I don't understand it. Somebody must have found her."

"Is it not more likely that she has been taken away to some more obscure and safe hiding place?"

"No," replied the guerilla, decisively. "I was with Jepson when he put her in thar. He never took her out. If she's gone, then she has escaped, or I reckon some one has found her out and rescued her."

It was quite plain that Leary was sincere. Jack Clark stepped forward and cut the ropes which bound his wrists.

"You are free, Leary," he said. "I hope you will adopt a better life."

The guerilla looked at the boy captain intently, and said: "I will."

Then he turned and slipped away over the verge of the bluff. He was not seen again.

"Well," said Jack, "this seems to end the matter. I must say that I am much disappointed."

"There is one consolation," said the scout. "We know that she is not hidden away in this secret hole to starve and die."

"That is true."

But Jack and Hal decided that their mission was ended. They had done all they could to rescue Betty Vane. She was doubtless already free and beyond danger. They had captured Jepson. There seemed nothing more to do but to return to their military duties.

CHAPTER XIII.

BACK TO THE LANDING.

The boys felt that Betty Vane was safe ere this with friends. In due time she would meet Captain Clayton again, and their happiness become assured.

The Blues could now only return to Mississippi Camp and await orders.

So the return march was begun.

Leary was gone, and they had no guide. This did not seem necessary, as they had their own trail to follow.

They marched on for some miles, and had come to a highway, when a startling thing happened.

From a clump of trees a few hundred yards away there belched a volley of musketry. By great good fortune, the aim was high, and it went over the heads of the Blues.

In an instant Jack Clark gave hurried orders to the Blues to fall back.

This they did, in good order, to a little depression which marked the bed of a dried-up water-course.

Here the Blues were able to return the fire of the foe.

It did not take Captain Clark long to discover that the foe were, numerically, much stronger than the Blues.

It was not a cheering reflection.

The foe lay in their path. The Blues were a long way from Mississippi Camp. They could not hope for reinforcements.

On the other hand, the Confederates might at any moment be joined by others, and without entrenchments the Blues might be surrounded and captured.

It was a moment of much anxiety to Jack Clark. He paced up and down the firing line, keeping his glass leveled on the foe.

He saw that the woods beyond the road swarmed with the foe. They were massing on right and left.

The young captain was in a dilemma. He looked about in vain for a point of vantage where he could hope to make a strong defence.

He could not seem to see such. At this moment Hal Martin came up.

"It looks black for us, Jack," he said. "I'm afraid we're in a bad scrape."

"Have you looked beyond the ridge?"

"Yes."

"It affords nothing?"

"Nothing, I fear."

"There is then but one chance left. The Yazoo is two miles in our rear. If I am not mistaken, a steamer has been sent to the landing to get the troops there. If we can make a running fight of it, we might possibly succeed in escaping."

"They are certainly too strong in our front to risk a standing fight."

"It seems so."

"Well, Jack, I believe your plan is a good one. We will continue to fall back. We will fight and run."

"That is the idea!"

So the Blues, with a clever flank movement, began their retreat. They fell back rapidly for six hundred yards.

The foe, thinking that cowardice was the cause of the retreat, came on with fierce yells to the charge.

But the Blues turned and, under cover of a ridge, poured such a murderous fire into the advancing ranks of gray that they were thrown into confusion.

While the Grays were thus recovering the Blues retreated another full quarter of a mile.

This brought them out of the open country into the confines of the Yazoo swamp. This was a distinct advantage.

It was much easier holding their ground in the swamp, with the protection of the trees, than in the open fields.

The Confederates, eager to corner the foe before they could escape in the swamp, came on fiercely.

But Jack Clark contrived to hold them back, and all the while kept up the retreat. That fight in the Yazoo swamp the Boys in Blue never forgot.

Twenty of the brave youths lost their lives in that desperate battle. They fought fiercely and hard, all the while drawing nearer to the landing.

It happened that Colonel Percy, at the landing, heard the firing. He at once, with great sagacity, sent six hundred men to flank the Confederates.

So it happened that at a time when the Blues were hardest pressed musket fire and yells sounded far to the right.

The Confederates saw swarms of blue-clad soldiers coming down upon their flank.

This was enough.

From time immemorial, the bravest of soldiers have succumbed to a flank attack. In this case the Confederate assailants were no exception.

With wild disorder they broke and fled. In a few moments they were in full retreat. The fight was over.

The Blues had been relieved just in time. In the dark jungle there were many wounded and dying Confederates.

Jack Clark met Colonel Percy, who was much surprised to see him.

"Why, Clark," he said, "the boys of the Prairie Belle said you started to march overland to Mississippi Camp!"

"So we did," replied Jack.

"Have you been in the swamp ever since?"

"By no means! We marched to Mississippi Camp and reported to General Smith. He detailed us upon special duty. In pursuance of that duty we were attacked by a large force, and here we are."

"Well, you are a wonder," declared Percy. "Smith sent down a flatboat for the rest of us."

"Is it here?"

"Yes; we abandon the landing in an hour."

"The deuce!" exclaimed the boy captain. "We are then just in time."

"Yes—just in time!"

"Good! I have lost many brave boys in this fight."

"It is too bad! We will linger only long enough to bring up the wounded."

The Union soldiers were already engaged in bringing

in the Confederate wounded. These were carried aboard the steamer, to be cared for there.

The Blues, after their hard fight, found themselves pretty well used up. They rallied at the landing, and the roll call showed a loss of one-fourth of their number.

This was most dismaying. Such a depletion of their ranks could only mean the necessity of at once recruiting.

Jack Clark had been slightly wounded in the arm. Tom Peters had a flesh wound in the leg.

"Well, we pulled out fortunate after all," declared Hal Martin. "We might have been captured."

"I am glad, indeed, that we avoided that," said Jack. "Do you know, Hal, that I have been doing some serious thinking of late?"

"What do you mean?" asked the young lieutenant. "On what subject?"

"Since we left Fairdale we have participated in many hot fights and several hard campaigns. But few of the boys who first enlisted are with us now."

"That is true."

"They have either been killed in battle or been incapacitated by wounds and sent home. The record of the Blues has been a glorious one."

"So it has, Jack."

"Fortunately, our officers have all escaped. To recruit the Blues now as we did at first is going to be a difficult matter."

Hal looked at the young captain in a questioning way. His face changed.

"Do I grasp your meaning?" he asked. "You don't mean—to—think of—mustering out the company?"

Jack was silent a moment.

"We won't decide yet, Hal," he said. "It may become necessary for the good of the service. It is not possible for any military organization to go through the war and preserve its ensemble. The Blues, as an organization, must undergo the usual change. The boys with us now are not the same boys. While they are brave, they have not the company spirit of the original Blues. Do you see?"

"I understand, Jack," said Hal, nodding slowly. "But it is our duty to remain in the service."

"And we will do so until the last gun is fired. If it should become necessary—mind, I say, if—that we should disband the Blues, you and I are easily assured of staff positions, where advancement is quite possible."

Hal drew a deep breath.

"It sends a wave of sadness over me to think of disbanding our brave little company," he said. "They have covered themselves with glory, and not the least shadow of disgrace can be charged to them."

"For that very reason," said Jack, "it may be better to retire the Blues on their laurels than to risk a defeat or possible stigma in the future."

"You may be right."

"As I said before, it is a matter for future consideration."

Just then Colonel Percy came up and said:

"We are getting our men aboard, captain. Are you ready to embark your company?"

"Yes," replied Jack, readily. "Give the order, Hal. Fall in, Blues!"

The little company was marched aboard the gunboat.

Then, when the last man had got aboard, the colonel gave the order for the boat to cast off.

The steamer was soon on its way up the sluggish waters of the river. She was a wooden river steamer converted into a gunboat by mounting cannon on her decks.

It seemed to Jack and Hal as if the campaign about Vicksburg was over, for the time, at least.

They were not altogether sorry, for both were jaded and worn, and a rest would be welcome.

But that the incidents of the campaign were not yet over was quickly to be proved.

It happened that Jack had occasion to go below. As he did so he passed through lines of Confederate wounded.

And near the end of the line he saw a familiar face. A great cry escaped him.

"Captain Clayton!" he gasped. "Is it you?"

The young Confederate captain had a shattered arm. His pale face lighted up with joy, and he said:

"I am glad to see you, Clark. You see, I am out of the war for a time."

"You are wounded?"

"Yes, my arm is shattered. But I think I shall be all right in time. If I only knew where she is—you know—Miss Vane——"

"Yes, I know," replied Jack. "But I think you need have no fears. I feel sure she is in good hands somewhere. At least, Jepson can do her no more harm. He will be sentenced to death."

"Your words are comforting. I have reached a very definite conclusion, Clark."

"What?"

"This war is all wrong. We are fighting brother against brother. God grant it may soon end."

"I hope it will," said Jack, fervently. "You will be taken to our camp, Clayton. Of course, you are a prisoner of war."

"Yes; but——"

"What?"

"Perhaps I can secure a parole and go home. I am sick of fighting. I feel that it is all wrong. The eyes of all, both North and South, will soon be opened."

CHAPTER XIV.

A HAPPY MEETING.

"You never spoke truer words," said Jack Clark. "The truth will come out. Then we shall have peace."

"Heaven speed the day!"

"Now, Clayton, keep up good courage. I shall personally look after your needs. If you desire, I will exert my influence for your parole later on."

"I thank you, Clark. I could not feel kinder toward my own brother. I shall never forget you."

Jack passed on with a queer lump in his throat. He

was just climbing the gangway to the upper deck when a startling thing happened.

There was a crash and a rending of wood over his head. Part of the steamer's rail was carried away by a solid shot.

In an instant there was an uproar.

The loud orders of the officers were heard as the gunboat's crew rushed to quarters. Her guns were quickly sighted, and heavy firing began.

Jack reached the deck in time to take in the stirring scene.

A Confederate gunboat had suddenly swung into view from behind a bend in the river and, at sight of the Union craft, had at once opened fire.

Instantly the Union captain answered, and soon a merry duel was in progress. The fight became a vicious one.

Of course, all that the infantry on board could do was to watch and remain idle. There was little likelihood of the fight coming to close quarters.

But just then a shell from the Union boat's gun pierced the Confederate boat's hull and exploded.

A great hole was blown in her side, and the water rushed in. The scene was a thrilling one.

The gunboat's stern went down first. The crew all sprang overboard and began to swim ashore.

A moment later the boat had struck bottom, leaving only her smoke pipe above the surface.

Of course the Union gunners cheered wildly. For a moment it seemed to them like a victory.

Then the startling discovery was made that their own craft was taking water. An attempt was made to locate and repair the leak.

But it soon became apparent that she could not be kept afloat.

"There's no help for it," said Colonel Percy. "We've got to make a march of it to Mississippi Camp."

So the boat's bow was rammed hard into the river bank, and a hasty disembarkation was made.

It was none too soon.

The helpless wounded would have gone down with her in a few moments more. Jack Clark and the Blues did yeoman service in rescuing the wounded.

When Captain Clayton was carried ashore Jack stood and gave orders:

"See that he is kept with our company, Corporal Peters. I want you to detail men to carry his stretcher."

"All right, sir."

So, when the long march to Mississippi Camp was taken up, young Captain Clayton was carried by the Blues.

And it need hardly be said that he was glad of this. The young captain was not in the best of spirits.

There was, of course, now no way but to take up the long march through the swamps. The gunboat was a helpless wreck.

Word could not be sent for another boat, for the reason that the Confederates were making it unsafe for Union craft in the river now.

So Colonel Percy decided to push on afoot. He sent

a heavy skirmish guard ahead, for it was known that large bodies of Confederates were in the region.

On through the swamp pushed the body of Union troops.

At times axe men were obliged to go ahead and cut a way through the dense undergrowth. All sorts of obstacles were met.

But steadily onward they marched until the noon hour was long past. Then a halt was called.

There was a sort of open space or clearing in the swamp which offered a good place to camp. Here they paused. The Blues were to the right, and rested on the banks of the little creek.

Fires were made, and the boys proceeded to make their coffee. Thus matters were when Jack Clark met Hal, and the young lieutenant said:

"I say, Jack, I have made a discovery."

"Ah," said the young captain. "What is it?"

"There is an Indian camp near here."

"An Indian camp?"

"Yes."

"How do you know that?"

"Easy enough. A few moments ago I took a walk out yonder through the woods. I went on beyond the creek and, taking a path, I walked about half a mile. In a little clearing I saw wigwams and numbers of braves and squaws."

Jack was thoughtful.

"Do you think it the Natchez camp?"

"I don't know."

"If I thought it was, and that we might find Uh-namulgee there, we would pay him a visit."

"Let us walk down there and see. It will not take long."

"All right."

The proposition met with Jack's favor. The two young officers were soon on the way.

They followed the path described by Hal. It was not long before they had reached the end of the path, and there was the Indian encampment.

That they were Natchez Jack saw at once by their totem pole. The two young officers boldly advanced into view.

They were seen at once, and the boys experienced a thrill when they saw a slender, female figure approach them.

It was Wahteenah.

"Cracky!" exclaimed Hal. "That is the pretty Indian girl. She knows us."

"So she does."

The boys waited for Wahteenah to come up. There was an eager expression on her face.

"White soldiers are welcome," she said. "Wahteenah can tell you good news about white girl."

"What!" cried Jack, with sudden inspiration. "Do you mean Betty Vane?"

"She is here."

"Here?" cried Jack, with wild delight. "I say, Hal, here is a go! And Clayton is in our camp! Hurrah! Fate has brought this about. Wahteenah, we must see her."

The Indian girl smiled.

"White soldiers are welcome," she said. "Come with me."

They followed her. She led the way at once into the encampment. The braves saluted the visitors in their dignified way. The squaws cuffed their papposes and sent them skurrying away, that they might not annoy the white soldiers.

Wahteenah paused before one of the wigwams. She spoke a few words, and then there emerged quickly the graceful figure of Betty Vane.

A great cry escaped the young girl, and she sprang to greet the boys.

"Oh, Heaven is kind!" she cried. "I am so glad to see you!"

"And you!" cried Jack. "We had almost given you up."

"Indeed, I had abandoned hope myself. I was rescued by these good Indians. I shall never forget their kindness. Wahteenah is to be my sister."

She placed an arm affectionately about the Indian girl's neck.

"I have good news for you," said Jack.

"Indeed, Captain Clark! Your words are cheering."

"You know Captain Clayton?"

"Yes," she replied. "I know Captain Clayton."

"He is very near here. With your permission, I will take you to see him."

"Does he want to see me?" she asked.

"Yes, very much."

"Why, then, has he not come here with you?"

There was a light of reproof in Jack Clark's eyes as he replied:

"You are like all of your sex. Know you that Captain Clayton is unable to come to you. He is wounded."

She stepped forward and said:

"I will go with you."

"Very well, Miss Vane."

But she turned and embraced Wahteenah.

They did not have a chance to see and thank Uh-namulgee. The Natchez chief was not in the camp.

A few moments later Betty was accompanying Jack and Hal back to the Union camp. Through the swamp they went, and crossed the creek at last.

Colonel Percy had already resumed the march. The Blues, though, had waited for the return of their young captain.

Jack led the way to a spot under a live oak tree, where was the stretcher on which lay the wounded Confederate captain.

Clayton turned his head at their approach. In an instant he had started up with a wild cry.

Jack and Hal restrained him. Betty Vane sank down beside him, and cried:

"Oh, Charlie! We are together at last!"

"Yes," cried the young captain; "and we shall never be separated again."

Jack and Hal left them and went about their duties. It was an hour later that the Blues again got under way.

Beside the stretcher of the wounded young captain walked Betty Vane. She tenderly nursed him.

They did not reach Mississippi Camp that day.

They were compelled to camp in the swamp. But the next morning they resumed the march, and by noon had come in sight of the Union camp.

Colonel Percy had already arrived, and his troops were in bivouac. The Blues met with a warm welcome.

Clayton was sent to the camp hospital. Here he was given skilled treatment, though the surgeons declared:

"You will never be fit for military service again. Your arm will never be strong enough to hold a sword."

Clayton drew a long breath.

"Well," he said, "I have done my duty by the Confederacy. I cannot reproach myself. To take me to a Northern prison would be unnecessary. I will sign a parole never again to take up arms against the United States."

Colonel Percy made reply:

"I have already mentioned the matter to General Smith. You shall have the parole within twenty-four hours. Safe escort will then be given you beyond our lines."

With a happy light in his eyes, the young captain turned to the girl he loved.

An hour later the parole arrived. The next day the young Confederate captain and his betrothed bade farewell to the Blues and took their leave.

To-day they are prominent in the social circles of the new South. And, with this announcement, we need follow them no further in this narrative.

CHAPTER XV.

WHICH IS THE LAST.

The Blues bivouacked at Mississippi Camp for a week. In that time there were many changes.

Jack Clark found that it was no longer an easy matter to recruit their depleted ranks. The same class of boys was not to be found.

Plenty of men of a different stamp were to be had. But the personnel of the Blues was gone.

It was natural that the fact should cause the young captain much reflection. He was fully as ardent as ever in his love of a soldier's life.

But he was convinced that there must be an immediate change.

"I tell you, Hal," he said, despondently, "it makes me sad to think of giving up our little command. But I am convinced that it is for the best."

"I agree with you," said Hal; "and every day only makes it more evident. I see that President Lincoln has been obliged to order a draft."

"Volunteers are lacking?"

"Yes."

"I think I will see General Sherman at the earliest moment. We cannot possibly recruit the Blues to the full strength of the company with boys."

"That is true."

As it happened, General Sherman, returning from his victorious assault on Arkansas Post, came to Mississippi Camp the next day.

Jack and the remnant of the original company decided to disband.

That day Jack paid a visit to General Sherman. That great general welcomed him most heartily.

"Well, my boy," he said, "how are you and your little company? I have heard much of their success around Vicksburg."

"General Sherman," said Jack, "I have come to ask your advice."

The general's eyes kindled.

"Yes?" he said, inquiringly. "What is it?"

"Don't you think it a wise thing for us to disband our company?"

General Sherman gave a great start. It was an unexpected question. His face grew grave, and he said:

"Are you serious, Clark?"

"I am."

"May I ask why you seek to disband?"

"Yes."

With this Jack gave him full reasons. The general's face cleared as he listened.

"You are right, Clark," he said. "I can see that it is the best move. Your little company has, in its original state, passed practically out of existence. You can now serve your country better in some other branch of the service. In fact, it is a strange coincidence that yesterday I received this letter from President Lincoln."

General Sherman produced a letter, dated at Washington and signed by the president.

"Read it," he requested.

Jack took the letter and read it.

"My Dear Sherman: I have been compelled to make a draft for the further replenishing of the sadly shattered ranks of our army. This is a matter to be greatly deplored. But the losses have been heavy, and much sadness and sorrow fills nearly every Northern home, from which some member of a family has gone never to return.

"But our greatest lack is of young officers who have had experience in battle. We can throw thousands of recruits into the field, but there must be competent officers for them. I don't mean generals of staff, but colonels and captains and majors. The mortality among efficient officers has been frightful. I call to mind a young officer in your army, not above the rank of captain, who would be efficient as colonel, or even brigadier general, for he has fighting spirit and skill. I refer to Captain Jack Clark, of the Fairdale Blues. See if he will not accept promotion. He will be an efficient man on your staff."

(Signed)

"A. LINCOLN."

Jack Clark's cheeks burned. He handed the letter to General Sherman, and said:

"The president's kind heart dictated that. He gives me too much credit."

"Not a bit, my boy!" cried General Sherman. "Now, I will take you on my staff with the rank of colonel. You will be advanced rapidly."

"I accept!" cried Jack. "But I must speak a word for my lieutenant, Hal Martin."

"I know him," replied Sherman, readily. "I promote him to be lieutenant-colonel. Every officer of the Blues shall have a place on my staff."

"I thank you very much," replied Jack, overwhelmed with joy. He hastened to carry the news to his brother officers.

It need hardly be said that they were eager for the change. A few days later, in military form, the Fairdale Blues were mustered out of service.

But Jack Clark and his brother officers were given promotion, and again plunged into the great battles of the war, though in a different and higher capacity.

From Vicksburg they marched with Sherman through Georgia to the sea. They took part in the great battles about Atlanta, and were at Appomattox when Lee handed in his final surrender.

To-day they are respected men of family in the great city of New York. Jack Clark and Hal Martin, a short time since, attended a reunion of the remnant of the former Blues.

At that time a hearty toast was drank to the beautiful wife of General Clark, once Miss Nellie Prentiss, of Richmond, Virginia, a Southern girl and a former schoolmate.

It was the dark cloud of the war which had for a time separated them and overshadowed the mutual affection which had formed birth in their schooldays.

Nellie Prentiss had been loyal to the Confederacy while it lasted, for she was a true Southern girl. But, when the cause was lost, she quickly changed her allegiance to a new and reunited country, destined this time to endure.

And Jack Clark found his way to her side instinctively. They are very happy to-day, and have two homes, one in New York City, and the other in Richmond.

And with this announcement we end our stories of Captain Clark and the Fairdale Blues. In our next number we shall detail the further adventures of the Virginia Grays.

Tom Peters is a merchant in New York. Sergeant Joe Ward owns a western ranch. Lieutenant Hal Martin, who was promoted to colonel, is in business with Jack Clark in New York. And that is all.

THE END.

Read "FORCED TO SURRENDER; OR, THE BOYS IN GRAY'S HARD LUCK," which will be the next number (32) of "Blue and Gray Weekly."

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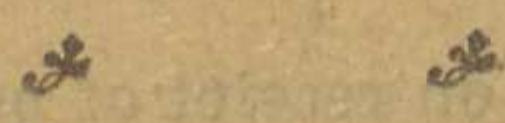
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